

Discussion

The Paradox of Nature and Grace:
On John Milbank's *The Suspended Middle*:
Henri de Lubac and the Debate
Concerning the Supernatural

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I

WHEN DID modernity begin? Or can something that emerged only slowly from the chrysalis of the Middle Ages even be said to have “begun” at one easy-to-spot moment? No doubt, the transition from the Middle Ages to modern times was gradual. But just as what would later be known as Protestantism began before Martin Luther (with Jan Hus, Matthew Tyndale, and others), even though historians conventionally set the date for the onset of the Reformation at 1517, when Luther posted his ninety-five theses, so too I like to think that the birth of modernity can be dated to that fateful moment when the first Renaissance scholar first realized how much he disliked medieval theology and philosophy. Long before John Dewey pilloried medieval philosophy for asking how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, indeed even well before David Hume sneered at Christian *odium theologicum*, the European intelligentsia of the Renaissance lamented the alleged sterility of scholastic theology. Although a lot of this criticism proved to be based on ignorance or laziness, it has to be admitted that some topics that provoked heated debate among scholastic theologians do seem, to modern minds,

numbingly arcane—and perhaps never more than the scholastic debates over grace.

Just think of the distinctions—so many different kinds of grace! Reading a typical scholastic tractate on grace can give uninitiated readers the impression that they have suddenly stumbled into the theological equivalent of the paint section of a hardware store, with esoteric names for all the different shades of blue affixed to the tabs of paint samples: Just as Sherwin-Williams Paints will distinguish between sky blue, azure blue, zephyr blue, Mediterranean blue, Grecian blue, cobalt blue, Wedgwood blue, and so on, so too scholastic theologies of grace will insist on subtle distinctions between habitual grace, sanctifying grace, prevenient grace, actual grace, sufficient grace, condign grace. What is all this *about*?

As a matter of fact, a great deal rides on how the Church interprets grace. Consider for a moment the question of pluralism, meaning here the plurality of religions. If God is the Lord of his creation, why are there so many religions in the world? What does this plethora of religions say about God's intentions for the world? Prescinding for a moment from the many possible positions adopted by theologians in their attempts to come to terms with this plurality, one can detect two basic approaches: Either one can say that "it's all the same God anyway," and thus each religion is ineluctably moving toward some Transcendent Meaning, however defined; or one can say that these various religions are making incompatible truth claims that have to be adjudicated on terms other than the naive positing a transcendent element in human beings that provides a more or less direct access to God.

A moment's reflection will show that both options help to determine, and are determined by, one's views on the relationship of nature and grace. If all men are *naturally* religious (even when they are avowed secularists and atheists), and if all religions (and ideologies) give equal access to the transcendent, then this must imply that there is a more or less seamless transition from (man's) nature to (God's) grace. But if one religion (Christianity, say) raises a truth claim over all the others that can be shown on its own grounds to be true over against the truth claims of all the other religions (and ideologies), then this too must imply that grace is somehow radically distinct from man's religious nature, without which grace man will wander in darkness until he encounters the true grace of the one true religion.

If the latter position is the option one takes, then the witness of the Bible raises even more difficult problems regarding a theology of grace. There we hear stories of God's choice of Abel over Cain, of Jacob over Esau, indeed of Israel over the other nations (the name "Israel," it should

be remembered is a patronymic for the nation as a whole drawn from the name given to Jacob after he wrestled with the angel of the Lord). But even the election of Israel is internally volatile: for within Israel itself a "Remnant" of tribes (Judah and Levi) survives the vicissitudes of history, while the so-called "lost tribes" are wiped out of history by the Assyrians. Not even election, it would seem, proves to be that gracious!

Now whether theologians first decide to solve the problem of pluralism in religion and then develop a theology of grace to justify that position, or first work out a theology of grace and nature and then draw out the implications of that theology when taking up the question of pluralism, is itself an intriguing methodological question, one that need not detain us here. For the real point is simply that the two issues are inextricably linked—and deeply relevant. What should strike the reader as immediately obvious is that one's position regarding pluralism in religion both determines and is determined by the position one adopts regarding the relationship of nature to grace. The closer the link between nature and grace, the easier it will be to detect signs of grace in all the religions of the world without exception, including even those ideological "religions" like secularism and communism. Even atheism can be looked on as an episode of grace, given the right perspective.¹

¹ A telling example of such a shift in perspective would be Vatican Council II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*): "Atheism results not rarely from a violent protest against the evil in this world, or from the absolute character with which certain human values are unduly invested, and which thereby already accords them the stature of God. . . . Yet believers themselves frequently bear some responsibility for this situation. . . . Hence believers have more than a little to do with the birth of atheism. . . . While rejecting atheism, root and branch, the Church sincerely professes that all men, believers and unbelievers alike, ought to work for the rightful betterment of this world in which all alike live" (*Gaudium et Spes* nos. 19, 21). In light of that document, the remarks of Pope Benedict XVI at his Wednesday allocution of November 30, 2005, are highly relevant here: "We want to commend to St. Augustine a further meditation on our psalm [137, Vulgate 136]. In it, this Father of the Church introduces a surprising element of great timeliness: He knows that also among the inhabitants of Babylon there are people who are committed to peace and the good of the community, despite the fact that they do not share the biblical faith, that they do not know the hope of the Eternal City to which we aspire. They have a spark of desire for the unknown, for the greatest, for the transcendent, for a genuine redemption.

"And he says that among the persecutors, among the nonbelievers, there are people with this spark, with a kind of faith, of hope, in the measure that is possible for them in the circumstances in which they live. With this faith in an unknown reality, they are really on the way to the authentic Jerusalem, to Christ. And with this opening of hope, valid also for the Babylonians—as Augustine calls

But if grace is regarded as more or less “extrinsic” to human nature, landing upon some people and not others, then we are forced to look for signs of God’s presence in the world using a different norm than the ubiquity of religion as an anthropological constant. In other words, with an “extrinsic” view of grace, we are leaving open the possibility that God speaks to some and not others, chooses some and not others, saves some and not others. If that is the case, then we must admit a greater distinction between nature and grace than some theologies will allow.

In any event, the point about the debate on nature and grace is that, at least when conducted properly, decisions on these matters should not be determined by an individual’s preference for how he would *like* God to act; rather, the decision should be made according to an analysis of what it actually means for a nature to have a nature, and for grace to be a grace. Nature and grace are concepts that operate within theology by certain inherent “laws” of conceptual clarity, which is why scholastic theology felt compelled to draw so many fine distinctions as it became increasingly clear how subtle is the relationship between nature, free will, grace, predestination, justification, and so forth.

To keep things on a purely conceptual plane for a moment, let us take the use of the word “grace” in ordinary language. One of the words frequently used in English that is derived from the Latin word for grace

them—for those who do not know Christ, and not even God, and who nevertheless desire the unknown, the eternal, he exhorts us not to look only at the material things of the present moment, but to persevere in the path to God. Only with this greater hope can we transform this world in a just way.

“St. Augustine says it with these words: ‘If we are citizens of Jerusalem . . . and we have to live on this earth, in the confusion of the present world, in the present Babylon, where we do not live as citizens but are prisoners, it is necessary that we not only sing what the Psalm says, but that we live it: This is achieved with a profound aspiration of the heart, fully and religiously desirous of the Eternal City.’

“And making reference to the ‘earthly city called Babylon,’ he adds: In it ‘there are people who, moved by love for it, contrive to ensure peace, temporal peace, without nourishing another hope in their hearts than the joy of working for peace. And we see them make every effort to be useful to the earthly society. However, if they are committed with a pure conscience in these tasks, God will not allow them to perish with Babylon, having predestined them to be citizens of Jerusalem, on the condition, however, that, living in Babylon, they do not seek pride, outdated pomp and arrogance. . . . He sees their service and will show them the other city, toward which they must really long and orient all their effort’ (*Commentaries on the Psalms* 136, 1–2: *New Augustinian Library*, XXVIII, [Rome, 1977], 397, 399).” Pope Benedict XVI, “Commentary on Psalm 136(137): ‘A National Hymn of Sorrow,’” *Zenit*, November 30, 2005, www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=80896.

(*gratia*) is “gratuitous,” which carries the meaning of “unowed,” as in a gratuity or tip offered to a waiter. According to the laws of justice and economic equity, one *must* pay one’s restaurant bill; but one is under no (legal) obligation to pay a tip, at least in most American restaurants (ugly stares upon leaving the restaurant without giving a tip do not count here).

Not surprisingly, therefore, one of the central concerns of the Magisterium of the Church has always been to preserve a teaching on grace that guarantees its essential gratuity: God does not *owe* us grace. Merit does not count. Justice is irrelevant. Rights do not cut it. God gives to whom he will, and that seems to be the end of the matter. No appeal, no complaint, no whining allowed. If Cain’s sacrifice is repugnant to the nostrils of the Lord, but Abel’s is pleasing, that is just Cain’s tough luck.

And does not the essential gratuity of grace seem to be reflected in salvation history? In other words, do not the stories we have already cited—Abel, not Cain; Jacob, not Esau; Israel, not the Gentiles; the tribes of Levi and Judah, not the other ten “lost tribes” of Israel; the Remnant, not the *massa damnata*—do not these stories illuminate the very point entailed by insisting on the essential gratuity of grace?

Yet there is another meaning to the word “gratuitous,” which often is applied to behavior that seems unjust or unwarranted, as in “gratuitous slur.” Is not God unjust in choosing but one nation (and in the eyes of world history a rather pathetic one at that) among all other nations for his Chosen People? And not that God treated *them* with much special care either, bullied and browbeaten as they were by one empire after another, or so it would seem.

If St. Augustine can say “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You,” is it not unfair of God to withhold his grace from natures who seem destined for only one fulfillment, the fulfillment that comes from full union with God? If all human beings need, by virtue of their nature, union with God and long for it, why are there so many religions? Do they all give more or less equal access to God? Is grace therefore universal? Are religions merely symbolic systems that give ritual grammar to a universally present divine grace?

Needless to say, I am not raising these questions to resolve them, only to highlight how debates on grace influence—and even determine—their resolution, and why so much rides on the outcome of these seemingly arcane debates. To go from the Crusades to interreligious dialogue is, among other things, to move from one understanding of grace to another. Look to the headlines, and behind them you will see an implied theology of nature and grace at work.

II

Henri de Lubac, the great French historian of theology, was, by almost universal consent, the theologian who almost single-handedly altered the terms of this debate in the twentieth century, at least for Catholics; a man whose efforts to rethink this knotty issue helped to determine the outcome of the Second Vatican Council, itself a headline-generating event if there ever was one.²

For all these reasons and more, John Milbank's fine—albeit rather short—monograph, *The Suspended Middle*, on de Lubac's theology of grace is particularly welcome.³ Although too sketchy in much of its argument, especially when the author has to argue some of his more controversial and counterintuitive points, Milbank's exegesis of de Lubac's revolutionary work at times reaches the brilliance of his subject, de Lubac himself, which perhaps is not surprising, given that he is a noted Anglican theologian in his own right and one of the founding inspirations of the theological school called "Radical Orthodoxy."

The book has one central thesis, with a few additional points added to give greater highlight to the main point of the book. Here is the main thesis:

If Creation implies both autonomous being and entirely heteronomous gift, while grace implies a raising of oneself as oneself to the beyond oneself, then the natural desire of the supernatural implies the dynamic link between the two orders that constitutes spirit, such that this link is at once entirely an aspect of the Creation and entirely also the work, in advance of itself, of grace which unites human creatures to the Creator. (39)

Here is the dilemma in a nutshell: According to Aristotle, what belongs to a nature belongs to it necessarily. Thus if man is a "rational animal," the faculty of rationality cannot be removed from that animal if it is still to remain human—rationality, in other words, is *necessary* to humanity. Furthermore, desires essential to the fulfillment of each nature must also necessarily be fulfilled; otherwise the essential nature of the being in

² One of the problems entailed in the interpretation of Vatican II in the postconciliar period stems from the fact that that epochal Council did not promulgate an explicit teaching on nature and grace, although it clearly operated out of a shift in perspective, one largely (almost single-handedly, one might say) effected by Henri de Lubac, which highlights once more how deeply relevant this issue—and this man—is for the life of the Church.

³ *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* by John Milbank (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 117 pp. Page numbers to this book will immediately follow any quotation; all other citations will be footnoted.

question is frustrated, distorting and even destroying that being. Thus the hunger for food is both necessary to animality and must be fulfilled if the animal is to survive as the being it is.

But if the human creature is created specifically for God, and thus desires God as part of its essence, then it would seem that such a desire cannot stand frustrated without warping and even destroying that creature specifically as a *human* creature. But then what happens to the gratuity of grace? What happens to the elevation of man to a state beyond his natural constitution if that elevation is but the seamless fulfillment of a natural desire?

De Lubac's solution to this perennial theological conundrum was first to admit the paradoxicality in the juxtaposition of the two concepts of nature and grace, a paradox that he then sought to resolve through what Milbank rightly calls a revisionary ontology:

[De Lubac's] account of grace and the supernatural is *ontologically revisionary*. The natural desire cannot be frustrated, yet it cannot be of itself fulfilled. Human nature in its self-exceeding seems in justice to require a gift—yet the gift of grace remains beyond all justice and all requirement. This paradox is for de Lubac only to be entertained because one must remember that the just requirement for the gift in humanity is itself a created gift. (30; original emphasis)

The reason that Milbank (rightly, in my opinion) finds de Lubac's theology of grace to be so ontologically revolutionary is because de Lubac realized, perhaps more than any other theologian of the twentieth century, that the presence of spirit in the cosmos requires a revision in the standard terms under which debates on grace and nature took place. In other words, spirit is a *different kind of nature* from the natural forms found in the rest of the natural world, and thus requires a different kind of ontology than Aristotle's more biologically determined ontology can provide. *To be spirit is to be receptive*; moreover, it is to be *conscious* of reception:

To receive spirit, according to de Lubac, is always to be conscious of partial reception: one knows that one is not all of possible knowing and willing and feeling and moreover that, since our share of these things is what we are, we do not really command them, after the mode of a recipient of possessions. Hence to will, know, and feel is to render gratitude, else we would refuse ourselves as constituted as gift. Such gratitude to an implied infinite source can only be, as gratitude, openness to an unlimited reception from this source which is tantamount to a desire to know the giver. (44)

In other words, even though the invocation of the concepts of nature and grace must rely on their own internal logic of consistently applied terms (nature referring to what is necessary and grace to what is gratuitous), spirit too demands its own logic, one that can resolve, in a way not done since Thomas Aquinas, the often sterile and unhelpful tractates of the past:

Hence for de Lubac . . . the logic of spirit as gift governs both the realm of nature and the realm of grace and the hinge between them that is the mystery of the supernatural. Were one to allow the thesis of pure nature, says de Lubac, no gratuity of grace would thereby be established, but only the kind of gratuity proper to a this-worldly ontic gift offered to an already present and “ungiven” recipient. This model cannot reach radical divine ontological gratuity. (44–45)

Again, these reflections might seem almost pointlessly abstruse; but in fact, as we pointed out in Section I of this review, a great deal rides on them, to such an extent that not to get them right can cause a lot of damage both to theology and to the pastoral outreach of the Church. Moreover, the missteps that followed in the wake of Thomas when the concept of pure nature was introduced into his thought, missteps that de Lubac did so much to counteract, can do much to explain the dialectic between Duns Scotus and Martin Luther, whose irresolvability helped to contribute to the Reformation and to the breakup of the Western Church:

[With the concept of “pure nature”] one still faces the sort of problems which plagued all theologians after Scotus and especially those of the seventeenth century: namely, how does the pure nature receive the gift—of its own volition or by the gift as standing over against its natural ungivenness? The first solution is Pelagian; the second, in Lutheran fashion, sees grace as overriding our freedom. (45)

One of the great contributions of this eminently lucid book is the way Milbank is able to show how much was lost in this debate when the term *influentia* was no longer interpreted according to the neo-Platonic schema of participation (especially in Proclus) but was seen as merely *external* influence. Using a happy image, Milbank contrasts these two different metaphysics of causality by comparing a teenager doing her evening’s homework as against the influence of a mystic influencing a person’s whole approach to life’s duties:

On the older, fundamentally Proclean model, the higher and especially the highest cause is always more deeply active at a lower level than any

secondary cause. [ST I, q. 105, a. 5]. . . . But on the newer view, a higher cause operating on a lower level is just "one other" causal factor—like homework set by a teacher for the evening which is only one factor, alongside the demands of boyfriends and girlfriends, what's on downtown, etc., determining how the evening will actually be spent. It is quite *unlike* the instructions of a mystical master which might "inform" the entire way one spent the evening. (92)

It always pays to notice the metaphors used by a theologian in explaining knotty issues. For example, Bonaventure took theology on a fateful turn when he explained the simultaneous influence of grace and free will on the analogy of two men pulling along one barge upstream, an image that Adolf von Harnack for one (rightly, in my view) saw as implicitly Pelagian. Thomas Aquinas, however, preferred the analogy of art (in the inclusive sense, embracing also craftwork), as lucidly explained by Milbank:

Hence Aquinas argues that intellect properly governs the whole cosmos and that material things are there for the instrumental use of the intellect: they are the instruments of its art, such as when, to give his example, a man deploys an axe to give to some lumber the form of a bench that he has intellectually conceived. Spirits, though, are in turn ordered to the divine end. This then means that, whereas natural things are governed by immanent spirit, the latter as self-governing is also directly governed by something trans-cosmic and supernatural. . . . Because the divine art creates spirits, God can "instrumentalize," treat as his raw material, even mind. Therefore, grace, one might say, is "the art of spirit-governing." Just as human beings fulfill, for example, the proper potential of wood by making a table and yet wood would never "tableize" by itself, but needs to be "given" the form of table, so we are elevated (with the angels) by a divine art that does not abolish but fulfills our nature, though in a contingent, unexpected way. (99–100; original emphasis)

And this insight then allows Milbank to justify the central thesis of the book, that excess of expectation can yet represent a fulfillment of deepest longing, but which yet remains entirely gratuitous (wood can hardly "demand" to be turned into a table; yet when wood becomes table, it receives a whole new form that is nonetheless still entirely consonant with its nature as wood):

In this way . . . de Lubac turned the tables on his opponents. The supposition of an actual identifiable pure nature in fact ruins the articulation of divine gratuity and can historically be shown to have done so. The gift of deification is guaranteed by no contrast, not even with Creation, never mind nature. How could it be, since like the Creation, it is a gift

to a gift which, in this spiritual instance, the gift then gives to itself in order to sustain its only nature? How could it be guaranteed by contrast, since the gift of deification is so much in excess of Creation that it entirely includes it? (46)

III

So far, so good. But Milbank's book does not mean to be purely exegetical, brilliant as his exegesis often proves to be. For together with these expository passages, the author also wishes to argue several other ancillary theses, the main ones being: (1) the incompatibility of de Lubac's theology with Pius XII's condemnation of the denial of *natura pura* in his encyclical *Humani Generis*; (2) the inadequacy of Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology over against de Lubac's; and (3) the failure of both de Lubac and Balthasar to let de Lubac's revolutionary ontology influence their respective ecclesiologies. We shall take up each of these theses in turn.

1. As to *Humani Generis*, it is universally acknowledged among de Lubac scholars that the French Jesuit modified the views he set forth in the 1946 edition of *Surnaturel* after Pius XII promulgated his encyclical on August 12, 1950, with its famous gauntlet thrown down to the proponents of the *nouvelle théologie*: "Others destroy the gratuity of the supernatural order, since God, they say, cannot create intellectual beings without ordering and calling them to the beatific vision."⁴ Subsequent to that encyclical (the publication of which led the Jesuit Order to force de Lubac to withdraw *Surnaturel* from circulation), de Lubac published a vastly expanded version of his earlier study, which came out in two volumes, *Augustinianism and Modern Theology* and *The Mystery of the Supernatural*. As all de Lubac scholars recognize, in that latter volume de Lubac made important concessions to the legitimacy of the concept of pure nature, concessions that Milbank not only regrets but finds incoherent to his genuine theory.⁵

Over against this objection a number of points can be registered, not least of which is that Milbank needs to update his library, for he uses the 1958 translation of *The Mystery of the Supernatural* and not the more recent 1998 edition put out by Crossroad. Admittedly, the latter edition still uses lucid translation by the Rosemary Sheed (with

⁴ In *The Papal Encyclicals: 1939–1958*, ed. Claudia Carlen (Raleigh: McGrath, 1981), 175–86 at no. 26.

⁵ "After *Humani Generis*, outside his historical work, de Lubac comes across as a stuttering, somewhat traumatized theologian, only able to articulate his convictions in somewhat oblique fragments. . . . His reaction to the encyclical . . . provoked in him severe theoretical incoherence" (7, 8).

most of the quotes in Latin, which were left standing in the 1958 edition, now translated for monoglot students). But the new edition also carries an important introductory essay on the significance of the book by David L. Schindler, which contains this telling anecdote:

When Pius XII learned through de Lubac's Superiors and the mediation of Cardinal Bea of the continuing criticisms of de Lubac, he had Cardinal Bea send a letter to de Lubac "whose every word he dictated," in which he thanked de Lubac "for the work accomplished up until then" and encouraged him about continuing such work since it "promised much fruit for the Church."⁶

Furthermore, de Lubac himself did not see the encyclical as condemning his central thesis in *Surnaturel*, a point he stressed in a letter to a friend who sought his reaction to *Humani Generis*:

It seems to me, like many other ecclesiastical documents, unilateral; that is almost the law of the genre; but I have read nothing in it, doctrinally, that affects me. The only passage where I recognize an implicit reference to me is a phrase bearing on the question of the

⁶ David L. Schindler, introduction, in Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed and John M. Pepino (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), xxii–xxiii. Unfortunately, Milbank does not seem to be aware of this passage because he is using the 1967 Geoffrey Chapman edition of the Sheed translation and not the revised 1998 version from Eerdmans (as we will see later, this is not the only instance where the author will demonstrate that he needs to update his library). Because of the importance of this letter from Bea for both de Lubac's reputation and for the right interpretation of *Humani Generis*, de Lubac reproduced the letter in his *Mémoire sur l'occasion de mes écrits*, which reads as follows: "I [that is, Father Bea] am happy to be able to communicate to you that the Holy Father has accepted with truly paternal kindness and with great joy the homage of your four volumes, which you presented to him through my hands, along with your beautiful declaration of dispositions of faith, obedience and affection toward the Vicar of Jesus Christ on earth. The Holy Father had a lively interest in the topics of your books and particularly of the fine work *Méditation sur l'Église*. He was delighted to see the scientific soundness attested to by the numerous notes and quotations. The Holy Father asked me to communicate his great gratitude and to tell you that he expects much more from the talents the Lord has given you for the good of the Church. He sends you wholeheartedly his blessing for your person, particularly for your health, and for all your works, and he encourages you to continue with much confidence your scientific activity from which much fruit is promised for the Church." Cited in Henri de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church: Henri de Lubac Reflects on the Circumstances that Occasioned His Writings*, trans. Anne Elizabeth Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 89–90.

supernatural; now it is rather curious to note that this phrase, intending to recall the true doctrine on this subject, reproduces exactly what I said about it two years earlier in an article in *Recherches de science religieuse*.⁷

One could, I suppose, argue that both letters were meant to be palliative and do not really address the core of the issue, but are only trying to let a sleeping dragon continue his exhausted slumbers. But since Milbank does not bother letting Pius XII and de Lubac speak for themselves here (he quotes neither letter), he cannot take up that argument. But since he clearly sees Pius and de Lubac as adopting entirely antithetical positions, let us assume that would be his argument and see if the issue between them is really all that irresolvable.

First of all, it must be stressed that the pope is dealing with a pure hypothetical: He is condemning a denial of what God *could* (but in fact did not) do. De Lubac, however, is dealing solely with what God *did* do. Nor is this distinction between *ex hypothesi* and *de facto* as irrelevant or as hairsplitting as it might seem, otherwise philosophers would never be able to devise thought-experiments to illuminate their positions. Take, for example, the possibility of intelligent life on other planets, the confirmation of which some think would represent another body-blow to the Christian conception of God's universal salvific will for the whole of the universe, an even greater crisis than that represented by the discovery of long-established civilizations in the Far East by the missionaries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Here an a priori limit placed (by us!) on what God *could* do would directly affect how Christians would react to such a discovery.⁸

⁷ Ibid., 71; unfortunately, de Lubac does not cite either the sentence in *Humani Generis* or where that same phrase may be found in his writings.

⁸ I am not making any statement here about the likelihood or unlikelihood of their being intelligent life on other planets, on which question I am entirely agnostic, except for maybe the hunch that if there is such life, we are not likely to ever hear about it, at least if intelligent life on other planets has evolved in the same way as it did on this planet. For whatever else evolution teaches, it tells us how sheerly provisional organic life is on earth, how late comes intelligence and how self-destructive it is. Given the constraints of the speed of light and the vast distances involved in communicating from one star to another (even within one galaxy!), direct two-way communications between interplanetary life forms seems precluded. Furthermore, some scientists argue on *de facto* grounds that the unique contours of the solar system are absolutely essential for organic evolution and are not likely to be repeated anywhere else in the universe. See Simon Conway Morris, *Life's Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe* (Cambridge:

Needless to say, the debate surrounding the issue of pure nature was not conducted with this issue of extraterrestrial intelligence in mind, which I raise only to point to its later (possible) future relevance and to why one should not dismiss Pius XII's concerns too readily. At all events, and as everyone recognizes, the concept of pure nature was introduced to provide a *conceptual* safeguard to the *concept* of the supernatural, which by definition must be gratuitous if it is to represent the free mercy of God freely bestowed. *And this conceptual utility of the concept of pure nature de Lubac did not deny*, a point Milbank does his best to obscure but which de Lubac himself openly avows:

The question is thus a circumscribed one, but none the less important for that. In effect, one of the chief motives that have led modern theology to develop its hypothesis of "pure nature" to such an extent that it has become the basis of all speculation about man's last end has been the anxiety to establish (as against the apparent deviations of Augustinianism) the supernatural as being a totally free gift. *In practice it has succeeded*. One may wonder, however, whether a more rigorous reflection would not fault the theory from this point of view. It would not be the only example in the history of theology of a theory which, *though achieving its immediate goal in practice*, did not succeed in satisfying the mind from every aspect. Since, then, our way of looking at things today cannot be the same at all points as that of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theologians, one may ask whether the theory elaborated by some of them can be adequate as a *permanent* safeguard for the dogma of the complete gratuitousness of the supernatural. Is it sufficient? Does it not require at least some *modification*? Without being a slave to philosophical fashion, without servilely accepting every new system of thought, one cannot prevent time from doing its work. One cannot, if one is to act intelligently—and theology requires that we should—refuse to answer real problems in the form in which they are presented. It is not this or that individual who dictates these changes in the formulation of problems; it is not something we ourselves do. They are imposed upon us as upon everyone else. To recognize them does not involve any conniving with the spirit of the age, nor any relativism in regard to doctrine: without recognizing them, one is unlikely to be able to say anything relevant at all. As will be seen, we can in fact return through them to the most traditional lines of thought.⁹

Cambridge University Press, 2003). If, however, one assumes, *pace* Conway Morris, that the extraordinarily large number of stars makes intelligent life likely, one must still concede that the distances entailed make communication between intelligent life forms in the universe virtually impossible. At that point, then, the concept of pure nature might not prove to be so pointless after all.

⁹ De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 53–54, emphases added.

Here perhaps is the most nuanced yet clearest and most succinct statement from de Lubac on his reaction to *Humani Generis* and the controversy that it provoked. Concepts, after all, have a life of their own; and what serves one generation well can take on implications they did not have (or were not perceived to have) when first proposed.¹⁰ And that is the real issue. What began as a conceptual distinction, to make the gratuity of grace stand out more clearly, took on a life of its own and became attached to what Newman calls “the prejudices of birth, education, place and party” and gradually became something different, much different: an implied apologetics for secular man! In one of those reversals that make history largely an account of ironic outcomes (history always obeys the Law of Unintended Consequences), the concept of pure nature became a kind of theological bacillus that started to eat away at the presuppositions of the Credo itself, as de Lubac makes clear in this telling passage:

It is said that a universe might have existed in which man, though without necessarily excluding any other desire, would have his rational ambitions limited to some lower, purely human, beatitude. *Certainly I do not deny it.* But having said that, one is obliged to admit—indeed one is automatically affirming—that in our world *as it is* this is not the case: in fact the “ambitions” of man as he is cannot be limited in this way. Further, the word “ambitions” is no longer the right one, nor, as one must see even more clearly, is the word “limits.” In me, a real and personal human being, in my concrete nature—that nature I have in common with all real men, to judge by what my faith teaches me, and regardless of what is or is not revealed to me either by reflective analysis or by reasoning—the “desire to see God” cannot be permanently frustrated without an essential suffering. To deny this is to undermine my entire Credo. For is not this, in effect, the definition of the “pain of the damned”? And consequently—at least in appearance—a good and just God

¹⁰ Even perfectly orthodox ideas can end up as distortions when the constraints of history and human nature act upon them, as Cardinal Newman was one of the first to see: “Considering that Christians, from the nature of the case, live under the bias of the doctrines, and in the very midst of the facts, and during the process of the controversies, which are to be the subject of criticism, since they are exposed to the prejudices of birth, education, place, personal attachment, engagements, and party, it can hardly be maintained that in matter of fact a true development carries with it always its own certainty even to the learned, or that history, past or present, is secure from the possibility of a variety of interpretations.” John Henry Newman, “An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine” (1845), in *Conscience, Consensus, and the Development of Doctrine* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 101.

could hardly frustrate me, unless I, through my own fault, turn away from him by choice. The infinite importance of the desire implanted in me by my Creator is what constitutes the infinite importance of the drama of human existence.¹¹

These passages, one should recall, come from the very book that Milbank claims represents a declension from the bolder statements in *Surnaturel*, a devolution of boldness allegedly due to de Lubac's craven obeisance to *Humani Generis*. On the contrary, de Lubac is only clarifying and nuancing a position he consistently maintained, but which required a more subtle formulation to take account of what he had never denied but which needed stressing after the encyclical's publication. And what was there to deny? Certainly, de Lubac had no intention of denying *history*. For did not Aquinas say "Every intellect naturally desires the vision of the divine substance" (SCG III, 57)? Did he not assert "Homo factus erat ad videndum Deum non in principio, sed in ultimo suae perfectionis" (*De veritate*, q. 18, a. 1, ad 7)? In other words,

this desire is not some "accident" in me. It does not result from some peculiarity, possibly alterable, of my individual being, or from some historical contingency whose effects are more or less transitory. . . . It is in me as a result of my belonging to humanity as it is, that humanity which is, as we say, "called." For God's call is constitutive. My finality, which is expressed by this desire, is inscribed upon my very being as it has been put into this universe by God. And, by God's will, I now have no other genuine end, no end really assigned to my nature or presented for my free acceptance under any guise, except that of "seeing God."¹²

2. Linked to Milbank's thesis that the views of Pius XII and de Lubac are incompatible is another claim: that the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, if not directly incompatible with de Lubac's theology (as it was, allegedly, with the teachings of Pius XII), is at least not as consistently brilliant and revolutionary as de Lubac's. This judgment is partly an outcome of some of Milbank's more extreme formulations of de Lubac's achievement, such as this startling claim late in his book: "Arguably he is, along with Sergei Bulgakov, one of the two truly great theologians of the twentieth century" (104). Likewise, according to Milbank, "it can now be seen that the *Surnaturel* of 1946 was almost as important an event of cultural revision as *Being and*

¹¹ De Lubac, *Mystery of the Supernatural*, 54, emphases added.

¹² *Ibid.*, 54–55.

Time or the Philosophical Investigations" (64). Given these large claims, one is not surprised that the author would judge Balthasar's theology as not quite measuring up.

But leaving aside the extremism of Milbank's admiration for de Lubac, which I would not wish to take away from him (for one thing, it helps motivate the author to give a sympathetic, and at times brilliant, analysis of de Lubac's fundamental intent), I believe his denigration of Balthasar in relation to de Lubac will not stand scrutiny. Early on, Milbank even admits that the phrase that he used for the title of his book, *The Suspended Middle*, comes from Balthasar and is used to describe the very thesis that Milbank will use to describe de Lubac's more important contribution.¹³

Still, Balthasar, both as an interpreter of de Lubac and as a theologian in his own right, is judged to fall short of Milbank's admittedly extraordinarily high standards. This judgment might seem eccentric, even perverse,¹⁴ until one finally realizes why Milbank so admires de Lubac and why he judges Balthasar to be so inadequate: for Milbank's admiration for de Lubac seems ultimately grounded, at least as I read his text, in his insistence that de Lubac was really the first advocate, *avant la lettre*, of Radical Orthodoxy: "In effect, the *surnaturel* thesis *deconstructs* the possibility of dogmatical theology as previously understood in modern times, just as it equally deconstructs the possibility of philosophical theology or even of a clearly autonomous philosophy *tout court*" (11). All of these assertions represent key themes in the Radically Orthodox argument,¹⁵ but whether they

¹³ "De Lubac soon realized that his position moved into a suspended middle in which he could not practice any philosophy without its transcendence into theology, but also any theology without its essential inner structure of philosophy." Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Henri de Lubac: An Overview*, trans. Joseph Fessio, SJ and Michael M. Waldstein (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 15.

¹⁴ I found Milbank's exaggerated enthusiasm for de Lubac amusing because Balthasar himself sometimes indulges in counterintuitive praise, as when he called Gustav Siewerth the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century. A sympathetic interpretation of that judgment would concede that Balthasar is not referring to Siewerth's *influence* (otherwise Heidegger or Wittgenstein would have to be given the nod) but to this philosopher's *position*: Thomist rather than Heideggerian or Wittgensteinian. But if that is Balthasar's point, should not the nod have gone to Etienne Gilson? Similarly, if Milbank wishes to praise de Lubac over, say, Karl Barth, fine; but if that is the issue, does he really wish to claim that de Lubac is a greater theologian than Balthasar?

¹⁵ See John Milbank, "Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics," in idem, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 36–52.

represent the real de Lubac is certainly a dubitable assertion, especially given his later work in ecclesiology (on which more later).

No wonder, then, that Milbank denigrates Balthasar's own theology, not to mention Balthasar's interpretation of de Lubac, for this is hardly a man of whom it could be said that he "deconstructs the possibility of dogmatical theology." No wonder, too, that Milbank will have this to say of Balthasar:

His concessions to *Humani generis* were arguably more real and substantial than those of de Lubac,¹⁶ as evidenced in the way his work more readily assumes the idioms of metaphysics, foundational theology, and positive dogmatics. This is no mere formal contrast: a corresponding substantive difference emerges in the way von Balthasar's dogmatics seems to float free of ontological conceptualizations into a "mythical" realm that is highly voluntarist and personalist, and in the end at times only tendentiously orthodox. (13)

These passages occur in the opening chapter of the book, where Milbank is adumbrating themes that will be taken up in more detail later. So one must turn to the sixth chapter ("de Lubac and von Balthasar Contrasted") to see the argument in detail, although even here, partly due no doubt to the brevity of the book, there really is not so much of an argument as there is a *catena* of raw assertions, which I think should best be listed in order before one sees whether these *obiter dicta* measure up to Balthasar's texts (which are only skimpily cited by Milbank). A lower-case letter is attached to each quote for ease of later reference:

- (a) For von Balthasar this issue is sometimes one of "how much" to grant to grace and "how much" to nature. But for de Lubac of course there can be no such question. Indeed that is his whole point. (67)
- (b) The always paradoxical French theologian, much more consistently than von Balthasar, insisted on a dialectical genealogy: it was not, according to de Lubac, the properly theological celebration of Man but the pious concern to conserve the gratuity of grace that engendered the monstrous titanic child of atheist humanism. (68)
- (c) There is . . . [a] transition in Balthasar from aesthetics to dramatics [which results in] an increasingly mythological rather than ontological register. (69)

¹⁶ Milbank also claims that Balthasar is inconsistent here, for Balthasar also accuses de Lubac (as Milbank rightly notes) of conceding too much to *Humani generis*. But that is just what Milbank accused de Lubac of doing! So perhaps the inconsistency is Milbank's, who can hardly have it both ways.

- (d) Balthasar's view [is] that the aesthetic, unlike the dramatic, is not interpersonal and interactive. Drama as interpersonal must mean either the real-world drama or else the internal dynamics of the stage; it cannot refer to the relation between a drama and its audience where the edge of the stage is conventionally inviolable. Clearly for Balthasar this "passive spectacle" aspect of the theatre is coincident with its merely aesthetic aspect. But such a notion betrays a profoundly Kantian attitude to the aesthetic, where the paradigm of the beautiful is the lonely spectator looking at a picture, not the participant in a dance or the dweller within a building (to invoke Gadamer's critique of the Kantian paradigm). (72)
- (e) For what becomes ultimate within this perspective is the invisible divine decree and our interior response to it. (The lack of any real historical, political, and ecclesial dimension to Balthasar's dramatics fits in with this picture.) (73)
- (f) One can argue that such a division is alien to the spirit of de Lubac, and that von Balthasar entertains it just because he ultimately encourages an abandonment of the metaphysics of cosmic harmony in favor of a Gnostic hypostasization of the violence of the Cross. (73)
- (g) The ontological difference is forgotten when von Balthasar speaks of a real "gain" to the Trinity from the suffering humanity of Jesus (even if for von Balthasar the Trinity has decided to receive from the Creation what it might have received within itself). (74)

Some of these statements are clearly wrongheaded; others are intriguing but need further amplification; and others are perhaps true accounts of Balthasar's thought but are defensible on their own terms, independently of whether or not de Lubac or Milbank would agree with them.

Surely the most absurd claim in this *catena* of assertions would be (d), for a more complete misunderstanding of both Balthasar's aesthetics and dramatics could hardly be imagined. First of all, Balthasar's sympathetic use of Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* in his *Prolegomena* to his five-volume *Theo-Drama*¹⁷ and of Bertolt Brecht's "alienation technique" in *Creator Spirit*, the third volume of his *Explorations in Theology*,¹⁸ shows that he in no way considers the boundary between proscenium and audience hall to be inviolate. In fact, he explicitly says

¹⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 244–248.

¹⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Bertolt Brecht: The Question About the Good," in idem, *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 3, *Creator Spirit*, trans. Brian McNeil, CRV (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 413–59.

that the transition from worldly drama to theodrama entails the spectator being yanked up on stage to play his part.¹⁹ Balthasarian aesthetics is not remotely Kantian but is inherently involving, as he makes abundantly clear in this passage early on in the first volume of *The Glory of the Lord*:

Before the beautiful—no, not really *before* but *within* the beautiful—the whole person quivers. He not only “finds” the beautiful moving; rather, he experiences himself as being moved and possessed by it. The more complete this experience is, the less does a person seek and enjoy only the delight that comes through the senses or even through any act of his own; the less also does he reflect on his own acts and states. Such a person has been taken up wholesale into the reality of the beautiful and is now fully subordinate to it, determined by it, animated by it.²⁰

One of the most acute of Balthasar's interpreters, Aidan Nichols, alerts us to a bit of slang used in teenage jargon, when an adolescent girl will say that a cute boy “sends” her, which amusingly gets at just what Balthasar means by the experience of divine beauty:

The one who has been encountered by beauty is not only challenged in his freedom, he is also branded for life, and thus becomes conscious of election. The elect person feels obliged to proclaim the Logos. Having a glimpse of the divine beauty *sends* the one thus privileged not only in the idiomatic sense of rendering him ecstatic (a coining for which we are indebted to the culture of Pop) but also in the theological sense of mandating him to go forth on a mission. The wonder of Being, communicating itself in the beautiful, tends of its nature to produce dramatic heroes—however ordinary (or extraordinary) their missions may be.²¹

A passage like this should also suffice to refute another of Milbank's peremptory “descriptions” of Balthasar's thought: subthesis (e), that all Balthasar has given us is a theology of an “invisible divine decree and our interior response to it.” As to his claim of there being

¹⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 2, *Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 54–62.

²⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 247.

²¹ Aidan Nichols, OP, *No Bloodless Myth: A Guide Through Balthasar's Dramatics* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 5–6, original emphasis.

a “lack of any real historical, political, and ecclesial dimension to Balthasar’s dramatics,” the claim can be refuted by even a cursory glance at his books *A Theology of History*, *A Theological Anthropology*, and the fourth volume of *Explorations in Theology*, called *Spirit and Institution*, which treat each of these issues in turn.

More mystifying is claim (c), that Balthasar’s theology becomes more “mythological” (whatever that is) than “ontological” when he moves from his aesthetics to his theo-dramatics, an odd claim coming from someone who is so Radically Orthodox that he can praise de Lubac precisely because, in a line we have already encountered, “the *surmaturel* thesis *deconstructs* the possibility of dogmatical theology as previously understood in modern times, just as it equally deconstructs the possibility of philosophical theology or even of a clearly autonomous philosophy *tout court*” (11)! But as to the direct charge of Balthasar’s alleged remythologization, we may cite in refutation this analysis by Gerard O’Hanlon:

Balthasar accepts the basic position [of God as Pure Act], with important differences however. These differences are due largely to his understanding of the way in which theology influences philosophy—and, in particular, to the way in which a theology of trinitarian divine love may affect a philosophy of God as Pure Act. Within this latter context he retains the foundational philosophical conclusion that there can be no created change or suffering in God. He does so because he *accepts* the reasoning which comes to such conclusions, and judges that the metaphysical system supporting these reasons is adequate to account for an understanding of the finite world and to point in the direction of its infinite creator. That God is simple would accordingly be acceptable to Balthasar at a basic level. He suggests, however, that the inner-trinitarian relations involve a receptivity and “ever-more” within the Pure Act and simplicity of God which is somewhat analogous to created potency, becoming, change and suffering. In doing so he goes beyond the use of the Trinity as support for the fact that God can be love without creation to a use which transforms the philosophical notion of being. . . . It is an utterly coherent position which has the great advantage of obviating any reduction of God to the mythological level of a changing Zeus or Apollo, ultimately as helplessly embroiled in the ambiguities of world history as the devotees to whom they respond.²²

²² Gerard F. O’Hanlon, *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 147.

In other words, Milbank is confused on two fronts, both of which reinforce the other: Far from abdicating his philosophical responsibilities for the sake of mythology, Balthasar accepts the deliverances of philosophical theology for his own work; but (in a manner neatly paralleled in de Lubac!) he also has no hesitation in turning the tables over to let theology instruct philosophy—and in a way that reforms philosophical theology without becoming mythological.

Balthasar, in other words, is consistently theological, which should itself make us suspicious of Milbank's further charge (f) that

one can argue that such a division [between interior response and historical mission] is alien to the spirit of de Lubac, and that von Balthasar entertains it just because he ultimately encourages an abandonment of the metaphysics of cosmic harmony in favor of a Gnostic hypostasization of the violence of the Cross. (73)

One suspects that Milbank's patently binary approach to de Lubac (pope vs. persecuted Jesuit) is also determining his contrast between Balthasar and de Lubac, with de Lubac representing solely the harmony side, with Balthasar spinning out a theology whole-cloth from an alleged Gnostic hypostasization of the violence of the Cross (an intriguing phrase, that, but left quite undefined).

But given Milbank's almost exclusive focus on de Lubac's contribution to the nature/grace debate, the real issue where Milbank claims Balthasar has misunderstood both de Lubac and the theology of grace comes from the first accusation (a), that "for von Balthasar this issue is sometimes one of 'how much' to grant to grace and 'how much' to nature. But for de Lubac of course there can be no such question. Indeed that is his whole point." Again, the misunderstandings of Balthasar's theology here are total—and made all the easier for Milbank to express both because they are so sweepingly formulated and are so little undergirded by any citation of texts from Balthasar's writings on the topic.

So what did Balthasar actually hold on this topic? It is of course not the purpose of this review to present his theology of nature and grace in all its contours; but an accurate presentation of his theology here can also illuminate exactly what he learned from de Lubac and in this way highlight the latter's achievement in a way less exaggerated than what Milbank has managed to convey.

First of all, Balthasar *accepts* de Lubac's (essentially historical) point that Thomas Aquinas knew only one end for nature, a supernatural

one.²³ But contrary to the impression left by that result of historical research, this essentially historical point does not necessarily render later theological distinctions invalid. Using a fascinating analogy drawn from the Christological debates of the fifth century, Balthasar shows how the concept of pure nature might have evolved in a way that would not have been recognized by earlier theologians yet which still retains its validity although it goes beyond the intent of Aquinas:

It is a well-established fact that the crucial theses of Baius, Jansen and Quesnel that the Church condemned can be found, almost word for word, in Augustine and to some extent in the canons of the Council of Orange (A.D. 527). The Church, however was not contradicting herself here any more than she once did at the Council of Chalcedon (453) when she explicitly rejected the very formulate of the one nature of Christ (*mia physis*) that she had previously approved at the Council of Ephesus (431). For the expression "one nature in Christ" at Ephesus meant: Christ was one single being in whom God and man were bonded not only through love and inclination ("morally") but also ontically ("physically"). But when Eutyches sought to interpret this unity as a fusion of the natures of God and man, the Council of Chalcedon had to refine the conceptual material and distinguish between nature and person in Christ.²⁴

Nor is this analogy merely a formal one, because both developments required a refinement in the concept of nature in order to avoid the heretical implications of a too one-sided interpretation of the meaning of the word "nature," as Balthasar explains in this lucid analysis:

Now a similar development occurred in the history of dogma between the time of Augustine and Baius, at least in outline: in the first case of the Chalcedonian shift to speak of two natures where previously Christ had been defined in terms of one nature, the issue was the Christological concept of nature as the presupposition for the true soteriological unity in Christ. In the second example, the issue was the universal and theological concept of nature as the presupposition for the charismatic union between God and man in Adam and in every human being endowed with grace. In other words, it was precisely because there was a need to understand the bonding that

²³ "Henri de Lubac in his 'Études historiques,' which he published as *Surnaturel* (1946), discussed this issue so lucidly (see esp. 431–80) that we no longer need to recapitulate the mains lines of his argument." Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, SJ (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 267, n1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 270.

took place in grace between God and man that God and the creature had to be differentiated in the pure concept of nature.²⁵

This concession might seem to confirm all of Milbank's worries that Balthasar has missed the deepest import of de Lubac's researches, that the concept of pure nature has unintentionally given a theological justification for secular man's sense that he has no need of God's grace for a fulfilled and fulfilling human life. But this would be like saying the Council of Ephesus illegitimately used its concept of nature because later heretics misused its definition. Similarly, the moves by later theologians to counteract Baius can be seen as legitimate in their own time, but they harbor problems for later ages, which can only be counteracted using further and more careful distinctions.

In that regard, I believe Balthasar represents a real advance in the debate, for he makes a move that, it would seem, de Lubac never made, or at least never made as fully as Balthasar did: the insight that man's nature is essentially a *culture-creating* nature. In fact, Milbank praises de Lubac precisely for *not* making this move, at least not forthrightly:

More explicitly than de Lubac [Balthasar] saw that the "middle" sphere of continuous event and sign is precisely the sphere of culture. He also was a Christian humanist; without Christian culture, he argued, there is only a nominal, not a mediated grace, which must remain uncomprehended and without real effect. (13)

It remains baffling to me why this would count as a criticism. For what has so often been missing from the nature/grace debate in Augustine, Aquinas, Suarez, Cajetan, Molina, and even to a lesser extent in de Lubac (except perhaps in his *Drama of Atheist Humanism*) is a sense that culture is so determinative (though not all-determinative) as part of man's end. Where else does culture arise except from man's spiritual nature? And it is precisely a look at culture that shows how we can understand grace operative throughout the kingdom of nature. Drawing on the insights of the nineteenth-century Italian theologian Domenico Palmieri (1829–1909), Balthasar notes that the very gradations of nature point to a grace-determined world:

How would it work if we used the term "claim" as the criterion for the content of the concept of nature? The whole of creation and its order is undoubtedly the free gift of God to which no creature has a "claim." Only within the already posited world order does this

²⁵ Ibid., 271.

concept have any meaning. But even here there remains the widest latitude for something like “grace.” Palmieri enumerates five moments that can throw light on this (purely natural) “grace”:

1. Every act of conceding that something is “necessary” in nature belongs to an infinite hierarchy of *gradations*, of which each one can seem like a “grace” to the other, narrower gradations.
2. The *de facto* immense *wealth* of creation, for example, of the animals and plants ordered to man, has a specific “graced” character as such.
3. Much that corresponds to human nature in general is not meant for each individual, for example, bodily and mental integrity, prosperity, and so on, especially since certain natural laws exclude the possibility that each isolated individual can partake of all these goods. They are thus, for the individual [who is lucky enough to possess them in prosperity], “grace” in a preeminent way.
4. God could have ordered the world in many other different ways: that he chose *this* total arrangement that furnishes so much beneficence to the individual as well as to the whole can certainly be characterized as a “grace.”
5. Finally the whole environment, necessarily ordered to an innate dynamic as such, is *de facto* and constantly contingent and so has a “gracious” character to it in all its details.²⁶

An example drawn from Peter Shaeffer’s play *Amadeus* can, I think, illustrate the point nicely. The play recounts the jealousy of Antonio Salieri, appointed court musician by the Austro-Hungarian emperor in Vienna—an appointment that Salieri attributes to his private vow to God to be a faithful Christian, and especially to keep his marriage vows in a court culture not exactly known for its high regard for marital fidelity. But with the arrival of Mozart on the scene, Salieri suddenly realizes that he has just enough talent to recognize Mozart’s genius—and his own mediocrity. Yet the young adult Mozart acts like an immature adolescent and traduces all the norms of decorum that Salieri has maintained in his bargain with God. It is not fair! God has given Mozart the “grace” of genius gratuitously!

The play was written well after Balthasar’s Barth book (although in his later *Prolegomena* to his five-volume *Theo-Drama*, he does cite other plays that make roughly the same point, especially Shakespeare’s

²⁶ Ibid., 277–78; the numbered points are drawn from Domenico Palmieri, *Tractus de gratia divina actualis* (Galopiae: M. Alberts, 1885), 7–8.

Measure for Measure), but Shaeffer's point nicely confirms Balthasar's more nuanced view that the nature of culture continually reflects a kind of "natural gratuity" in man's *Lebenswelt*.²⁷

Drawing on these natural manifestations of a kind of "natural" grace in culture, Balthasar is then free to come to the same insight that Milbank praises de Lubac for having reached earlier. As this crucial passage makes clear, Balthasar and de Lubac are in complete agreement:

*The positive definition of grace can only be given through grace itself. God must himself reveal what he is within himself. The creature cannot delimit itself in relation to this Unknown reality. Nor can the creature, as a theologically understood "pure" nature, ever know wherein it specifically is different from God. Only the light of revelation can draw this distinction and make this clear—not a philosophy that ascends from the world to God, or even (especially!) the mysticism of a Plotinus. But philosophy cannot do it even where what is called its *charis* has already been touched by the light of the reality of revelation. If we are to understand grace in the theological sense strictly as coming "from above to us below," then it does not suffice for us to settle on the one meaning of "freedom from debt" as a definition of grace. Even creation and still more everything within it is undeserved and holds no claim of debt. Grace is a participation in God's own life and, in common with creation, it also has—secondarily but necessarily—the character of being free of debt, unmerited.²⁸*

Although it can be no part of the brief of this review of Milbank's book to provide a fully fleshed-out delineation of Balthasar's view of the nature/grace problem, these quotes show, I believe, that Milbank's views on the alleged tension between de Lubac and Balthasar suffer

²⁷ The French theologian Jean Daujat makes roughly the same point, that the events of the social world are both a parable and a reflection of grace (and its absence): "As we understand the deeper meaning of the word 'grace' [in ordinary language], we see that it always implies that human beings are not walled up, enclosed, imprisoned in themselves, in what separates them from others, with their exacting requirements and well-defined rights, but that there is intercourse and frankness between them; that they are open with one another, and there is some mutual self-giving to another, and a sharing of something in common. The world of Sartre, with its abyss of nothingness between men, is a world without grace. Grace can be found only in a world of generosity. The Marxist world of struggle and hatred is a world without grace, for grace can be found only in a world where love is included in the very fundamental concepts of life, where even the existence of material things is a springing forth of love." Jean Daujat, *A Theology of Grace*, trans. a nun of Stanbrook Abbey (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1959), 12.

²⁸ Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 279, original emphasis.

from a superficial view of the latter's views, especially when compared to the much more sympathetic (if also at time problematic) analysis he devotes to the former.²⁹

3. Finally, there is an issue that binds Balthasar much more closely to de Lubac than Milbank would prefer: their similar ecclesiologies. In fact, where Milbank becomes most critical of de Lubac is in his ecclesiology, which is perhaps not surprising, since he thinks Pius XII and de Lubac were once poles apart but that de Lubac "caved in" to the pope after *Humani Generis* and by doing so only made his theology incoherent.

But at least Milbank sees, rightly, that Balthasar's and de Lubac's visions of the Church are animated by the same spirit, even if for that very reason are equally to be deplored:

Yet the *lacunae* in [de Lubac's] work were partly shaped by his battles with authority. Is there not some contradiction here between his and von Balthasar's formal capitulation to papal authority on the one hand, and their ecclesiology on the other, which stressed the primacy of the sacramental influence of the bishops as Eucharistic mediators? (104)

That rhetorical question only works if one first buys into the common motif of all liberal ecclesiologies without exception: that the institutional and juridical aspects of the Church are always and by essence incompatible with the charismatic and sacramental. Again, because this review must deal more with de Lubac than Balthasar, I

²⁹ Once again, Milbank needs to update his personal library. Part of the reason for his superficial analysis of Balthasar's thought is that he relies on the outmoded translation of Balthasar's Barth book done by John Drury in 1971. However, that translation, besides its numerous inaccuracies, left out about one-fourth of the original German—and precisely those technical passages treating the nature/grace debate in Catholic thought (presumably because the translator or publisher thought them too arcane for the English-speaking reader), an omission that irked Balthasar. After the book went out of print and the rights reverted to the author, the publisher (Holt, Reinhart and Winston) sought to reissue it, but Balthasar refused and gave the rights over the Ignatius Press, which then commissioned an unabridged translation from the author of this review. I hope the reader of this review will permit its author a small bleat of pain that the considerable work entailed in translating this demanding text proved to be in vain when it came time for Milbank to use de Lubac to attack Balthasar so tendentiously and inaccurately. I am sure that if he updates his library, Milbank will discover how unnuanced and schematic his juxtaposition of Balthasar and de Lubac proves to be, as the above passages (which do not appear in the Drury translation) make abundantly clear.

shall pass over Balthasar's ecclesiology, except to say that he devoted most of the fourth volume of his *Explorations in Theology* (called *Spirit and Institution*) to an explanation of why the charismatic and intuitional aspects of the Church are mutually dependent and mutually reinforcing. But for de Lubac I would say that to ignore his ecclesiological reflections written subsequent to *Humani Generis* (in particular *The Splendor of the Church*) would be to miss an essential aspect to his theology of grace.

This becomes particularly evident in de Lubac's critique of trends following in the wake of Vatican II. For in the postconciliar years he spotted an error at work, which, for him, was the mirror-opposite of the extrinsicism he fought before the Council: the opposite, but twin, error of intrinsicism. Intrinsicism comes to the opposite conclusion as extrinsicism but uses the same logic: Instead of preserving the gratuity of grace by positing a "pure nature," which then takes on a life of its own, unintentionally giving theological justification for secular independence of religion, intrinsicism so *fuses* nature and grace that anything natural becomes, by the very fact that it *is* natural, a form of grace, which again justifies secular man!³⁰

Again we are faced with the irony of history: Although it uses a different minor premise in its syllogism, intrinsicism ends up giving a mirror-image justification for secular independence from God. Admittedly, intrinsicism comes to the opposite conclusion from that drawn by extrinsicism—that grace more or less automatically wells up from within nature rather than confronting it extrinsically from the outside—but, in one of those ironies that have marked the life of the Church after Vatican II, this "naturalized grace" ends up justifying secular independence from religion, too, a trend that deeply worried de Lubac after the Council:

A necessary reaction [to the anti-Modernist exaggerations prior to the Council], a precondition for the necessary "opening" [called for

³⁰ In other words, both intrinsicism and extrinsicism share an implied major premise, that grace and nature can be placed on a continuum. This might seem obvious in the case of intrinsicism and surprising in the case of extrinsicism, but Susan Wood has caught out the implied presupposition in her succinct account of de Lubac's theology of grace: "One of the problems with the concept of pure nature and extrinsic, superimposed supernatural finality is that there is a tendency to see in the supernatural a continuation of the natural. That is, nature and supernature are conceived of as two species of the same genus." Susan Wood, "The Nature-Grace Problematic Within Henri de Lubac's Christological Paradox," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 19 (1992): 395.

by John XXIII], was taken to be revolutionary, and, in public opinion, which was very poorly informed, it was the tradition of the Church herself, with all her fertile but misunderstood richness, that seemed to be crushed. Many were no longer attentive to the very work of the Council, to the substance of its teachings, to the spirit that emanated from it: for them, through them, it was a new “modernity,” in restless excitement but without a compass, that triumphed over a petrified modernity. What can be said, since then, of the new powers of the day, who, in the reverse situation, suffer from a blindness that is more dense and all the more confident!³¹

Surely any interpreter of de Lubac cannot fail to notice his deep passion for the Church.³² But Milbank does more than slight de Lubac’s ecclesiology. Insofar as he takes note of it (and that only cursorily), he sees it as *the* snag that threatens to undo de Lubac’s achievement, and Balthasar’s, too: “Is there not some contradiction here between his and von Balthasar’s formal capitulation to papal authority on the one hand, and their ecclesiology on the other, which stressed the primacy of the sacramental influence of the bishops as Eucharistic mediators?” (104). I, however, rather think that it is Milbank’s ecclesiology of binary opposites (to the extent he reveals it in his laconic asides) that threatens to undo his critique of de Lubac and Balthasar. Even worse, he comes close to Gnosticism himself (ironically, given his accusations of that heresy against Balthasar) when he equates the eschatological Church with the Godhead. At least he seems to make that Gnostic equation, if I understand him correctly in this gnomic (and rather clumsy) passage:

There is a failure here to think of all the Church, in her bridal essence, as actively as well as passively Sophianic, as able potentially to meet the Bridegroom with an equal deified response since the Church, as the heavenly divine temple (Jerusalem who always abides with God above), is, one might venture to say, collectively, primordially and eschatologically enhypostasized by the Holy Spirit. (106)

³¹ Henri de Lubac, “A Glance at My Work (1975),” in *idem, At the Service of the Church*, 145.

³² Another example from the same essay quoted above: “I see with sadness the spread of an indifference, when it is not a flaunted scorn or a resentment full of bitter hatred, with respect to this tradition [of the Church], which alone has the promise of life and of renewal because it is the bearer of eternity. . . . How I would like to be able to try out with the same persuasive tone to those of my brethren who are letting themselves be seduced by this music of perdition what in the last century Newman declared to his contemporaries!” (*Ibid.*, 146).

Nor are the reader's worries here much assuaged, indeed they are greatly exacerbated, by the openly avowed Gnostic implications of this eternalizing of the Church: "This interplay [between God and the now-divinized Church], this essence, is also the active/passive (infinitely dynamic yet infinitely replete) *Sophia* which names the Christian Godhead (in its unified essence) as 'goddess'" (107). The Church is eternal, divine and feminine—and also so identified with the Godhead as to make God, too, eternal, divine . . . and feminine! These passages, as I say, are gnomic in their suggestiveness but clearly Gnostic in their implications (a problem that afflicts more than one Radically Orthodox theologian, in my opinion). Milbank is the very last theologian who should be accusing Balthasar of Gnosticizing tendencies.

IV

Part II of this review was meant to express my appreciation of Milbank's monograph and to celebrate its insights; while Part III pointed out what I saw as its flaws, its lacunae, and its distortions. But I do not want to end on a merely critical note. Milbank's short tract actually began as an overview article for a reference work, the third edition of *The Modern Theologians*,³³ where many of the themes discussed in his short book were first adumbrated. So clearly, the author thought he was on to something in the article that could be more usefully expanded in a book. True enough, but *this* book is hardly less of a sketch than the article was: Its theses are too controversial, its citation of the supporting literature too cursory, its formulations too gnomic, its exposure to the total corpus of de Lubac's writings too sketchy, to make the book convincing. But provocative and worth reading the book certainly is. I just hope that this critical review will prompt this influential theologian to write a full-scale monograph covering the total theological witness of Henri de Lubac, his ecclesiology very much included. If he is, as Milbank claims, one of the two most important theologians of the twentieth century, then he deserves no less.

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³³ John Milbank, "Henri de Lubac," in *The Modern Theologians*, 3rd ed., ed. David Ford with Rachel Muers (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 76–91.