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HENRI DE LUBAC'S THEOLOGY OF REVELATION

From Distance to Mystery

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I. Henri de Lubac and His Legacy

Among those who belong to the *nouvelle theologie* movement, Henri de Lubac, S.J., seems to have made the greatest effort to go back to the rich tradition of the Church in order to resolve conflicts way ahead of him.[1] This has resulted in several works on various aspects of the Christian faith such as the catholicity of the Church, the sacramental element of the Eucharist, and the spiritual interpretation of the Scriptures, among others. De Lubac's intellectual endeavours eventually left treasures which the Church (especially in and after the Second Vatican Council) has come to appreciate and adopt in her faith and life.

One of these treasures is de Lubac's unique way of articulating divine revelation which is heavily rooted in the spiritual experience of the Church Fathers, an experience which led them to develop a mystical way of speaking about God, a kind of "negative theology"

[1]David Grumett, "Henri de Lubac: Looking for Books to Read the World," in Gabriel Flynn & Paul D. Murray, eds., *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-century Catholic Theology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 237–238.

that was significant even until the time of the medieval period. This way of speaking about God—which implied that knowledge and experience of him can only be intuited by faith—did not attempt to exhaust or define God's mystery. In this light, one may ask: *how should one understand de Lubac's articulation of divine revelation, and in what way is it significant in his theology?*

The present article attempts to answer this question by presenting a sketch of de Lubac's own theology of revelation which distinctly bears elements of the "negative" theological tradition of the Church Fathers. This involves discussing several themes in de Lubac's own thought, namely a) the intellectual atmosphere to which de Lubac responds with a "rediscovery" of divine revelation, b) his articulation of divine revelation in his work *The Discovery of God*, which has both positive and negative elements of divine revelation, and c) the significance of this articulation alongside other themes on Christian faith and life which de Lubac has worked on. Lastly, this article shows that, for de Lubac, Christianity revolves around coming to know the mystery of God and living in that mystery which lies at an *infinite distance* from the mind. Although the mind desires to define and understand the mystery of God, it is visible and open only through the eyes of faith and love.

II. Understanding the Various Forms of Atheism Outside and Within Catholic Theology

Hans Urs von Balthasar regarded de Lubac's theological enterprise as his endeavour to confront the humanism of his time. It was a period heavily characterized by the loss of a sense of transcendence and an affirmation of humanity that had no need for a divine figure above it.[2] De Lubac's interest in divine revelation was primarily anthropological—he desired to redefine human existence and

[2]See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Henri de Lubac: An Overview*, trans. Joseph Fessio & Michael M. Waldstein (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 46–54.

humanity's search for meaning and transcendence according to how the Christian faith sees and understands the human being.[3]

More than that, however, de Lubac was also concerned with the problem of neo-Scholastic theology during his time, which alienated the human being and his life of faith from Church teaching and theology. These two forms of atheism within and outside the Church and Catholic theology prompted de Lubac to reflect on divine revelation and rethink the way it was thought of and presented.

In *The Drama of Atheist Humanism,* "a collection of articles loosely gathered together but internally a powerfully constructive work,"[4] de Lubac broadly analysed an array of prominent thinkers who spoke of God, faith, and religion. The first of its three parts discussed how the understanding of human life in the philosophies of Ludwig Feuerbach, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Karl Marx eventually led to a total separation of the human being from God. However, the idea of becoming human without the need for God was duly critiqued by Søren Kierkegaard, who delved into the depths of human experience to affirm in his own way the God who had been denied and considered dead.[5] The second part was devoted to the positivist philosophy of Auguste Comte, who yearned to replace the decadent Catholic Church in France with a vibrant positivism which stressed the evolution of the human mind towards a state in which a person could do away with God.[6] The common ground among these thinkers was the rejection of God in order to give way to the rise of humanity, with a radical affirmation of freedom and self-determination.

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[3]This is already evident in his discussion of atheist humanism, as he expresses to respond to an understanding of the human being which brings him towards himself but thrusts himself away from God (Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, trans. Edith M. Riley [Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1950], vii–viii).

[4]von Balthasar, *The Theology of Henri de Lubac*, 48.

[5]de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 54.

[6]de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 77–78.

According to de Lubac, Feuerbach's rejection of God was founded on his own concept of God as a mere expression of human aspirations.[7] As such, it was necessary that God—who is but a myth which the human being projects of himself—be banished so that he could be replaced by the human being who, after all, is the true god who possesses "liberty, dignity, reason, and prosperity," the very things that the god or gods of myth have deprived the human being of.[8] Marx then took this thesis to the threshold when he said that what Feuerbach ultimately lacked in his rejection of God was a total critique of religion and the actual conditions of his time. This was what Marx had set out to do— he developed Feuerbach's "cult of the abstract man" towards a religion of workers concerned with material conditions of living that rejected God as its basis.[9] Through this, Marx believed that he had properly restored the human being's divinity as he thought it should be.

Nietzsche, also a disciple of Feuerbach, moved toward another direction as he announced the death of God which the human being should wish for.[10] This "murder" of the divine would allow the human being to emerge as himself, to transcend his present condition. In de Lubac's view, Nietzsche calls the human being to

> produce out of himself—out of nothingness—something with which to transcend humanity; let him trample his own head under foot and shoot forth beyond his shadow …. The endurance test to which he was condemned himself will reveal to him his own divinity by bringing it into being. God is dead, long live the Superman![11]

This "Superman," creating his own fate and values and affirming his own human power, now walks alone and free to determine his end

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[7]de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 8.

[8]de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 13.

[9]de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 14–15.

[10]de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 22.

[11]de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 25.

and destiny, for he has no other God to bow to, and look forward to, except himself.[12]

In de Lubac's view, Nietzsche's and Marx's portrayal of the human being shows them to be atheistic humanists. While de Lubac finds in this way of thinking the value of affirming the human being's power, he points out that, in the end, this kind of humanism fails to truly understand the human being and his search for meaning.[13] Coming from the perspective of the Christian faith, de Lubac points out that this atheistic endeavour to liberate and develop the human being leads to self-destruction. This denial of God indeed allows the human being to emerge, but as one who is alone and by himself, unable to understand himself and pursue the meaning of existence. This is so because he has been fully extracted from the ultimate transcendence, from God who has shown himself to the human person as the ultimate purpose, meaning, and destiny that he seeks.[14] Simply put, humanity in rejecting God is also rejected and replaced with idols that speak of empty freedom and grandeur.

The same conclusion can be drawn from Auguste Comte's positivism, which he hails as the peak of the human being's intellectual

[12]de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 26–27.

[13]This is more evident in the second chapter of *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, when de Lubac juxtaposes Nietzsche with the philosopher Kierkegaard. Nietzsche's critique of Socrates and Socratism in order to pave the way for acknowledging and appreciating the element of mystery in the life of the human being in a sense also allowed Christian thought to break away from a narrow rationalism that left the Christian religion dry, and towards something that affirms and enriches life. Kierkegaard, however, sees the value of Socrates in terms of his method, and uses his method not to deny God like Nietzsche did but instead to affirm Him as part of the mystery that the human being questions and confronts in his existence. For de Lubac, Kierkegaard points out that the true end of Socratic questioning is in fact a recognition of the failure to completely understand this mystery, and thus calls for the human being's faith that leads to a "deeper immersion in existence." See de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 40–44, 52–55, 60.

[14]de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 32.

evolution. From this standpoint, Comte sees religion as fetishistic and infantile. In him, de Lubac sees an atheism that, beyond denying God, goes toward "the ideal of humanity" which can be achieved only through the comprehensive understanding of "nature, history, and mind" as promised by positivism.[15] Comte asserts, therefore, that positivism must replace Catholicism in all its aspects, as the human mind of his age is mature enough to take its place.

Such a replacement comes in the form of radical "transpositions" that supplant aspects of Catholicism with their counterparts in positivism. The foundation of this positivist religion is not the Triune God but the trinity of "Being, Fetish, and Environment,"[16] and the faith of its believers is demonstrable, founded on arguments that are certain.[17] The decadent Catholic priesthood is going to be replaced with scientists and positivist thinkers who bear a certain "encyclopaedic mind" which systematizes everything.[18] Above all, what is worshipped is humanity itself, not the Catholic God whose power and omnipotence only lead to the egoism of the human being.[19]

In all these efforts, de Lubac sees Comte luring himself into his own trap, caught in the same illusion that the human being can come to know himself through his own powers.[20] With no possibility for transcendence, the human being remains within himself. The result is a sociocracy that can easily degenerate into sociolatry, an undue veneration of society or state that resembles a "tyrannic regime." In effect, the forces that the human being desires to control within himself

[15]de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 79–81.

[16]de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 131.

[17]de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 141.

[18]de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 138–139.

[19]See de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 107–108.

[20]de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 147.

and within his society will crush him and deprive him of meaning and purpose.[21]

De Lubac's critique of this atheistic humanism leads to the question "who, then, is the God that the Christian faith believes in?" It is certainly not the God as understood and presented by the Catholic theology of his time, which has fundamentally failed to understand God's revelation and his relationship with the human being. In a way, this could be regarded as the other kind of atheism which de Lubac had to confront, an atheism of a sort which was very much present within the intellectual tradition of the Church.

The Catholic theology that de Lubac inherited and worked with, especially during his years in formation at the Jesuit houses in France and England,[22] was the Church's own effort to defend Christianity from modernism, which stressed the primacy of reason in all aspects of human life, religion and faith included.[23] In this regard, the Church returned to the authority of St. Thomas Aquinas, with Pope Leo XIII establishing neo-scholasticism as the Church's official intellectual framework for defending its teachings against, and attacking the errors of, modernism.[24] This move proved to be beneficial for the Church,

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[21]de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 157.

[22]John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 1–2. See also Aidan Nichols, "Henri de Lubac: Panorama and Proposal," *The New Blackfriars* 93:1043 (2012): 10–12; Georges Chantraine, "The Supernatural Discernment of Catholic Thought According to Henri de Lubac," in Serge-Thomas Bonino, ed., *Surnaturel: A Controversy at the Heart of Twentieth-century Thomistic Thought*, trans. Robert Williams (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2009), 22–23.

[23]For a brief background on modernism and its influence on Catholic theology during the 19th century, see Gerald A. McCool, *Nineteenth-century Scholasticism: The Search for a Unitary Method* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989), 17–19.

[24]See Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* 21–23, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_04081879_aeterni-patris.html. It is important to note here that Leo XIII not only established the primacy of

as it paved the way for a more synthetic and systematic articulation of the Christian faith. Moreover, this also allowed for the emergence of a rich neo-scholastic tradition which de Lubac himself largely benefited from.

De Lubac, however, was not satisfied with the Thomism which he studied. It was not so much because of St. Thomas himself; rather, it was because of the way St. Thomas was interpreted and discussed by his commentators, most especially Thomas Cajetan and Francisco Suarez, whose Thomism de Lubac received from his Jesuit formation.[25] An important concern for de Lubac was the way neo-scholasticism understood the human being, God, and the relationship between the two. Thus, what he found disconcerting and seemingly erroneous in neo-scholasticism was its view on the relationship between grace and nature in the human being's search for God.

What was problematic for de Lubac in Cajetan's and Suarez's reading of St. Thomas was the view that human existence had two possible ends: one natural, by virtue of his existence as a human being, and another supernatural, a separate order which was only possible for the human being through the grace of God. Furthermore, to preserve the gratuity of being ordained towards a natural end, Cajetan used the idea of "pure nature" (*natura pura*). According to him, the human being had a purely natural end outside the elevation of grace.[26]

St. Thomas' thought in terms of its synthetic value. He also saw it fit because it has historical precedence and provides practical benefits, among which is the means for a defense against the heretics of its time. See also Grumett, "Henri de Lubac: Looking for Books to Read the World," 237.

[25]De Lubac learned Suarezian Thomism under the tutelage of Fr. Pedro Descoqs, his Jesuit professor in philosophy (Chantraine, "The Supernatural Discernment of Catholic Thought According to Henri de Lubac," 25).

[26]See Henri de Lubac, "The Mystery of the Supernatural," in *Theology in History*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 296–297. De Lubac shows that it was, in fact, Cajetan who was able to fully articulate this notion as, more than just being a hypothesis, something that is real and separated from "supernature" made possible by grace (see Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery*

In the broader perspective of the relationship between God and the human being, this meant reducing God as a distant end to be pursued. This kind of thinking created a greater rift between the realm of the human being and the life of God, as if the former could be separated from the latter. De Lubac observed that,

> [w]hile wishing to protect the supernatural from any contamination, people had in fact exiled it altogether—both from intellectual and from social life—leaving the field free to be taken over by secularism. Today that secularism, following its course, is beginning to enter the minds even of Christians. They too seek to find a harmony with all things based upon an idea of nature which might be acceptable to a deist or an atheist: everything that comes from Christ, everything that should lead to him, is pursued so far into the background as to look like disappearing for good. The last word in Christian progress and the entry into adulthood would then appear to consist in a total secularization which would expel God not merely from the life of society, but from culture and even from personal relationships.[27]

Moreover, this sense of secularism comes with a perspective of God who is absent from the everyday concerns of the human being, from his mundane preoccupations with the ultimate questions that continually disturb him and call for his attention. This act of postulating a purely natural world eventually leads people to conceive "beyond that universe another, designated as 'supernatural' and declared 'more excellent,' 'more perfect,' or rather perfect in a different way, but of which there remains nothing else that can be said."[28] Examined

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of the Supernatural, trans. Rosemary Sheed [London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967], 7–9; Susan Wood, "The Nature-Grace Problematic Within Henri de Lubac's Christological Paradox," *Communio* 19 [1992]: 391; Chantraine, "The Supernatural Discernment of Catholic Thought According to Henri de Lubac," 28).

[27]de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, xi–xii, 61. See also Chantraine, "The Supernatural Discernment of Catholic Thought According to Henri de Lubac," 30–31, which outlines the various consequences of the concept of *natura pura*, among which includes one of de Lubac's main concerns: the separation between philosophy and theology.

[28]de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 55–59.

closely, it is nothing but a practical form of agnosticism in which God is reduced to a principle that cannot be achieved by the human being, a first and last term, taken in its narrow sense, in a link of causes. At best, it is a separation of human life from faith and theology, a life without anything to reflect on except its own ideas and concepts.[29] As a consequence, what remains is a human being that is "isolated, uprooted, and 'disconcerted,'" and left with a world that is broken.[30] What happens here in a way is a loss of the sense of God even within the Christian faith, and the result is another form of atheism similar to that which the Church has tried to defend herself against.

Responding to these two forms of atheism that challenge the Christian faith, de Lubac embarked on a rediscovery of the nature of God and his relationship with the human being.

III. The Discovery of God: The Intertwining Paths of Negation and Affirmation

Using various sources available to him during his time, de Lubac searched for an answer to the question of divine revelation. First, he returned to the writings of the Church Fathers in which he found a uniquely Christian way of being, believing, and acting that stood largely unnoticed in his time. De Lubac thus firmly believed that grappling with the questions and answers of the Fathers of the Faith would bring out a more genuine understanding of Christianity for his own time. Through them, he was able to bring out "certain permanent features … among the very diverse and sometimes contrary trends of Tradition."[31]

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[29]See Chantraine, "The Supernatural Discernment of Catholic Thought According to Henri de Lubac," 31; Nichols, "Henri de Lubac: Panorama and Proposal," 14.

[30]Henri de Lubac, "Christian Explanation of Our Times," in *Theology in History*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 443.

[31]Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. Lancelot Sheppard & Elizabeth Anne Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius Press,

Regarding divine revelation in particular, de Lubac frequently went back to St. Augustine who was able to explain the different aspects of Christianity and synthesize them into an organic whole.[32]

Beyond the rich Christian literature offered by the ancient Church, de Lubac also made use of his extensive formation in literature and philosophy, which provided him with an opportunity to encounter and confront figures (such as Fyodor Dostoevsky and Paul Claudel) whose insights on the human condition allowed him to speak and react against the prevailing intellectual atmosphere of his time.[33] Moreover, he used the existential philosophy of his time which dealt with the mystery of human existence;[34] among these philosophers, Maurice Blondel exercised a great influence on de Lubac with his own insight on human action as that which opens the human being toward transcendence.[35]

1988), 19–20; Grumett, "Henri de Lubac: Looking for Books to Read the World," 247.

[32]For the influence of St. Augustine in de Lubac's articulation of revelation, see Henri de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, trans. Alexander Dru (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, Ltd., 1960), 11–17. Milbank sees this Augustinian influence on the pages of *Surnaturel* and *Augustinisme et théologie moderne*, where de Lubac used Augustine against those who have misread him, particularly Baius and Jansenius (see Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 33–34). See also Nichols, "Henri de Lubac: Panorama and Proposal," 14.

[33]While Claudel was mentioned all throughout *The Discovery of God* (see Xavier Tilliette, "Henri de Lubac: The Legacy of a Theologican," trans. Mark Sebanc, *Communio* 19 [1992]: 338), de Lubac devotes a whole part of *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* to the novels of Dostoevsky (see de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 161–244).

[34]Scattered around his various works were references to philosophers like Henri Bergson, Gabriel Marcel, and Martin Buber, among many others, who take the understanding of human existence towards a direction that is largely phenomenological. In fact, he has written several reflections on the works of these existential thinkers. See Tilliette, "Henri de Lubac: The Legacy of a Theologican," 333.

[35]Grumett, "Henri de Lubac: Looking for Books to Read the World," 236–237; Nichols, "Henri de Lubac: Panorama and Proposal," 5–10.

One, however, must not discredit the great influence of St. Thomas Aquinas on de Lubac. His own study of the Angelic Doctor and the development of his thought in history led de Lubac to challenge and confront the Thomism of his time. He saw in St. Thomas a great desire and effort, grounded in the spiritual life and the Sacred Scriptures, to articulate his own faith. It was therefore necessary to return to this desire to fully understand St. Thomas' philosophical and theological synthesis. In doing so, de Lubac was aided by the works of French neo-scholastics such as Joseph Maréchal, Jacques Maritain, and Étienne Gilson, among many others.[36]

Through this rich variety of sources, de Lubac tried to articulate an understanding of divine revelation that countered the reductionist rationalism of his time. This effort is fully seen in *The Discovery of God*, which he deliberately leaves fragmentary yet which conveys his single and most coherent thought on divine revelation.[37] Here de Lubac presents two evident paths: the first path, a "negative" one, establishes God's *distance* from any concept of Him; this distance, however, paves the way for the second path, a "positive" one, which affirms the mystery of God who reveals himself as love most especially in and through Jesus Christ.

In the book's introductory essay "Abyssus Abyssum Invocat," de Lubac lays down his project of showing who and what God really is. He speaks of the God who introduced himself to Moses as the negation of all human gods constructed by myth and legend.[38] From there, he points out the incomprehensibility of God as the abyss that cannot be fathomed, much less equated with the gods the human being created for himself. This leads to an important question: in what way is this God *not* the same as the other gods of human thought and imagination?

The answer to this is found throughout all of de Lubac's works, and all of these converge upon a single answer: the incomprehensible God

[36]See von Balthasar, *The Theology of Henri de Lubac*, 12–16.

[37]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 9.

[38]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 12.

cannot be identified with any single concept, or with any combination of all these concepts. De Lubac is aware how the concept of God has been used by the modernist thinkers to establish and galvanize systems of thought; in doing so, however, they ultimately "lean upon God in the very act of denying Him."[39] Simply put, the real ground for their denial of God is in thinking that God is the same as their concepts of him and nothing more.

But the Christian God is not the God of reason and progress, "the first being in the chain of causes," and thus a mere principle or starting point to be able to explain everything.[40] He is also not the ultimate point of a historical evolution brought about by dissatisfaction with the earlier gods the human mind invented,[41] and he is definitely not a mere principle that offers sufficient reason for everything, or the conclusion of arguments that lead logically to belief.[42] For de Lubac, the God of Christianity, in his whole Godself, could in no way be reduced to these concepts.

But what can be said of God when all the concepts that the human being has mistaken for God have been rejected? At this point, de Lubac borrows the mystical insight of the thinkers of the ancient and medieval Church, whose words and thoughts he valued because their experience of God was more direct and immediate as opposed to the philosophers' knowledge of God which is mediated and conditioned by reason and understanding.[43] Because the mystics desire union with

[39]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 41. He thus points out that the reduction of God to concepts that would complete philosophical systems would eventually be denied of His existence, further alienating God from human experience. This is the god that Nietzsche denies, one who "cannot live anywhere but in the human mind" (de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 19).

[40]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 42, 67.

[41]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 34.

[42]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 41.

[43]This does not mean, however, that the philosopher cannot gain access to a genuine knowledge of God. De Lubac points to St. Thomas as one who

the God whom they come to know in their own contemplation and prayer, they arrive at something greater, "more fundamental and more total than the demands of reason."[44] Because they desire and ask for something that goes beyond mere knowledge, the mystics have been given a genuine experience of God.[45]

What de Lubac then saw in the mystical tradition is an attempt to speak of God as he shows Himself. Its language touches upon the divine reality but at the same time does not provide a complete definition of who God is. For St. Augustine and St. Anselm, God is the "illuminating" and "inaccessible" Light.[46] For St. Bernard of Clairvaux, he is "beyond weight and measure and number."[47] For St. Hilary, "there is nothing above him [God], nothing outside him, nothing without him. Beneath him, in him and with him are all things …." According to St. Gregory the Great, he is "everywhere … one and the same … penetrating all things by engulfing them, engulfing them by

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goes beyond the desire to explain and understand everything around him, from knowing the cause to the very nature of this cause. There is, however, a bridge that separates the concept of God from God Himself which can only be crossed by a "mystical impulse," one which St. Thomas was not able to fully articulate but nevertheless was able to arrive at by admitting that reason cannot fully understand and fathom the nature of this cause. See de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 141–148.

[44]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 143.

[45]De Lubac emphasizes this when he speaks of divine revelation and knowledge of it in experience as "belonging to [a] different order" (Henri de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature & Grace*, trans. Brother Richard Arnandez [San Francisco: St. Ignatius Press, 1984], 28–29), echoing the words of Blaise Pascal regarding divine revelation (see Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer [London: Penguin, 1966], §308/793).

[46]See de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 15, 47. He also sees the image of light in Hugh of St. Victor's and St. John of the Cross' exegesis of Rom. 1:20 (see de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 93).

[47]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 76.

penetrating them."[48] Pseudo-Dionysius describes him as "being his own being," but also the "being of all."[49] And St. Thomas, the great philosopher of Being, admits that one does not and cannot completely know "'what he is': we only know 'the relation of everything else to him.'"[50] All these ways of naming God point to what St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Augustine describe as one who is beyond comprehension, identification, and description.[51]

The experience and teachings of the ancient and medieval thinkers, which contain elements of mysticism, show that God would always escape thought. Just when the human mind thinks that it has known God, He withdraws from reason and eludes comprehension. He remains "above all names and all thought, beyond every ideal and beyond all value."[52]

From this careful consideration of what God is *not*, de Lubac was able to establish the negative element of divine revelation as "the incommensurable, the inapprehensible, that is to say impregnable."[53] In this way, de Lubac was able to affirm the *distance* of God from reason, that is, from total representation and conceptualization.

This does not mean, however, that this distance is the final word about God, as if he can be relegated to an abstract, unnameable mystery. For de Lubac, this is only a step towards coming to know who God really is. This negation, therefore, is in service of greater affirmation

[48]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 99.

[49]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 92.

[50]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 143.

[51]Gregory of Nyssa shows that knowing the name of God does not mean getting a hold of it (de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 145). St. Augustine expresses this more directly, saying that, in de Lubac's words, "[r]easoning by itself, supposing that the initiative were entirely mine … would give me only a completely indirect and wholly abstract knowledge" (de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 95).

[52]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 107; see also 121.

[53]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 120.

that knowledge of God can only come from God Himself, who gratuitously makes Himself known to his creatures.[54] Thus, knowledge of God comes not from the effort of the human mind to comprehend and define Him, but from His own self-disclosure.[55]

This paves the way for the second path to the knowledge of God which allows the human being to recognize and identify the inexhaustible and ineffable mystery of God, that mystery which goes beyond mere affirmations or negations, or the dialectical relationship between the two. For de Lubac, this knowledge is found at the very site where God comes to make Himself known—the innermost depths of the human spirit. That is where God resides and where the human being comes to be aware of Him. This kind of knowledge is deeper than any of the metaphysical and logical proofs of God's existence as it is in this instance that the human being becomes aware of something that lies beyond himself and yet within himself.[56]

By looking inward, the human being comes to see and hear the mysterious God calling to him, showing Himself to be his fulfilment, the ultimate meaning and transcendence that he seeks and ultimately desires. Here, according to de Lubac, is the unique path, in fact the truly Christian path, towards the affirmation of God. Instead of positing arguments that show the logical and rational necessity for belief, de Lubac shifts toward a language of invitation. He not only affirms that the mystery of God cannot be grasped by a concept; he also shows that this mystery can only be experienced and affirmed in the depths of the human being. In other words, this God can only be known *intimately* and *personally*. The idea of God that originates from such knowledge is far from being the objective ideas and concepts that the sciences produce in the mind. And while it is true that doubt can

[54]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 123, 127.

[55]De Lubac sees this point in the words of St. Irenaeus: "God himself is our authority about God; otherwise he is not known …. No one can have any knowledge of God unless God teaches him" (de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 13).

[56]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 12–14.

be cast on this idea, as the human sciences explain it to be something else and attribute a certain origin or cause to it, de Lubac is aware that the inward movements are still valid and would certainly lead to God.[57]

In going to the inner depths of the human consciousness and spirit, what does the human person find there in relation to the God whom he is seeking? Certainly, he does not find an objective and rational principle within. Instead, he finds a *Thou* who invites him to a personal encounter and relationship. Such an experience goes beyond understanding in the mind, for it affects the human being in his totality. Furthermore, this *Thou*, who calls the human person from the depths of his heart, reveals Himself within the context of the relationship that He wishes to establish. In other words, He discloses Himself in relation to the human being. This self-disclosure is not something "objective":

> It exists within an inter-subjectivity. It is not the exteriority of a *He* … but of the *Thou par excellence*. It is not the exteriority of an object which one dominates … but that of a subject to which one gives oneself, in which one finds oneself, which one has to think of as subsistent. That subject is in truth the *Other*, in the strongest possible sense of the word: the absolute Other, the mysterious Being enclosed within itself, always beyond our grasp, the totally personal Being, "the only *Thou* which, by definition, cannot be *That*." He cannot be represented, but whose reality is all the more compelling; through the knowledge of whom we become conscious of ourselves ….[58]

Here one can see how de Lubac strengthens the notion of God's distance from thought, and yet he provides a way, in fact the only way, towards affirming God's existence and his relationship with the human being. Therefore, inseparable from this notion of distance is a personal and intimate nearness to God not as a distant idea of the Absolute, but as the Absolute Himself whom the human being ultimately and wholly desires. In this way, there is a greater affirmation of God which in no way negates or displaces any of the concepts attributed to Him. In fact, it is only in the context of this personal encounter that these

[57]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 13–15. Regarding the idea of God, see 18–21.

[58]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 101–102.

concepts can be fully understood as pointing to, but not defining, God, that all ways of naming God imply that he is not merely such.[59] One recognizes, therefore, an abyss that thought and language cannot completely fathom.[60] All ideas of God put together cannot fully grasp or comprehend him, for they constitute only a part of his inexhaustible mystery that the human being cannot understand in its totality.

If there is, however, a more "precise" way of naming and identifying God in our language and thought, it can only be done through the use of *paradox* and *analogy*. The images and significations we use of God belong to the order of symbols and metaphors. They point to something that is of another order, higher than that of reason and thought.[61] On the one hand, analogy would always remind us that whatever we attribute to God always comes from our encounter with God as articulated in human language, and thus cannot be wholly accurate. On the other hand, the paradoxes we apply to God and his mystery (e.g., distant yet near, universal and absolute yet personal, known yet unknowable, transcendent yet immanent) are not mere figures of speech to communicate what is seemingly incommunicable; rather, they are very real paradoxes, truths placed against each other not to invalidate but to enrich each other.[62] They are not meant to be analysed to achieve clarity of thought; rather, they invite the human being to enter into the mystery they refer to.

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[59]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 78. In affirming this, de Lubac also affirms a fundamental epistemological claim implicit in all proofs and concepts of God, namely that, according to Maréchal, "there is always more in the concept than the concept itself" (de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 95).

[60]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 116.

[61]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 23, 93; de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature & Grace*, 67. Referring specifically to the paradox of mystery, he refers to paradoxes as those which arise in every mystery as "the hallmark of a truth that is beyond our depth" (de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 218).

[62]de Lubac, "The Mystery of the Supernatural," 308; Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes*, trans. Paule Simon & Sadie Kreilkamp (South Bend: Fides Publishers, 1948), 12.

One enters this mystery only by faith through which these paradoxes are resolved and at the same time maintained. It is through the most personal act of believing, which "reaches the secret depths of the soul," that the human being has an authentic experience and knowledge of the God who reveals Himself.[63] Through faith, the human being comes to see clearly God's mystery not in the form of mere propositions that provide clear definitions, but as the truth which penetrates his whole being and is definitely more than what he can say or describe.[64]

For de Lubac, this personal encounter with the mystery of God grants the human being the capability to know and name God as He really is: "God is Charity," as Saint John would point out (1 John 4:8, 16). He is himself the Truth, Justice, and Wisdom which are always infinitely beyond the truth, justice, and wisdom that the human being possesses and at the same time searches for.[65] God gives himself as a gift to the human being, a gift which, in the depths of his soul, he longs to see and receive.[66] In order to receive this gift, he is called to respond to its summons, namely, to live a life of charity, truth, justice, and wisdom, for only in doing so can he "possess" God,

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[63]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 154; de Lubac, *Paradoxes*, 9–10; de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 222–223.

[64]de Lubac, "The Mystery of the Supernatural," 309; de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 111–112; de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature & Grace*, 71. This mystery, for de Lubac, summons us toward action and being, which one experiences in seeing one's own situation in relation to the God who is always beyond himself (de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 156). Regarding this, Tilliette points out how de Lubac refers to the mystery of God through the notion of "ontological mystery" which de Lubac sees as well in Gabriel Marcel, Maurice Blondel, Charles Péguy, and Paul Claudel (see Tilliette, "Henri de Lubac: The Legacy of a Theologican," 338).

[65]de Lubac, *Paradoxes*, 13; de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 107; de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural,* 299.

[66]de Lubac, "The Mystery of the Supernatural," 298.

be in union with Him, and thus live in the ultimate transcendence and meaning that he constantly searches for, and is on the way toward.[67]

As a *Thou*, God does not reveal Himself as a voice from heaven like the one Abraham and Moses heard. Rather, out of His gratuity, that is, His charity, He manifests Himself to the human being as a *Thou* to be encountered personally in his concrete life situation. "The Christian knows that the only way to a real encounter with God is the Living Way which is called Jesus Christ."[68]

It is the glory of Christ shining in all his thoughts, words, and actions which grasps His disciples and leads them toward a different way of living and being. Christ reveals the mystery of God in its fullness.[69] His glory shines resplendently in the mystery of the Cross by which God gathers humanity in His embrace and renews it through a love that is never self-centered, a love that is offered even under the pain of not being loved back, a love that ultimately saves the human being from sin and death.[70] It is through the Cross that the human being—grasped and engulfed by the truth and glory of Christ—sees God and enters into a very intimate union with him. Christ thus stands at the center of the mystery that the believer seeks to enter into. In Christ, everything is brought together in a synthesis that goes beyond

[67]See de Lubac, *Paradoxes*, 13–14.

[68]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 212. It is also remarkable at this point to note that, for de Lubac, it is in the mystery of the Incarnation, and thus in Jesus Christ, that paradoxes become alive and palpable for the human being without being reduced or relegated to one term or another, as He Himself is the paradox that is both God and man (see Wood, "The Nature-Grace Problematic Within Henri de Lubac's Christological Paradox," 401; de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 28–29).

[69]See de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 209–210; de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 298; de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature & Grace*, 153–154.

[70]de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 367–369; de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature & Grace*, 157–161. See also Wood, "The Nature-Grace Problematic Within Henri de Lubac's Christological Paradox," 399–401; Tilliette, "Henri de Lubac: The Legacy of a Theologican," 339–340.

any form of synthetic or dialectic reasoning.[71] As such, He also stands as the center and foundation of the Christian faith and life.

Looking at de Lubac's treatment of divine revelation as a whole, we can then conclude that the distance of God from reason which de Lubac sought to establish is only in view of a further and ever greater affirmation. De Lubac points out that we can truly encounter and fully experience the mystery of God only in Jesus Christ who reveals Himself in the depths of our human heart. In and through Christ, God draws us toward union with Him in whom we can find our ultimate meaning and destiny. For de Lubac, this is the path towards discovering God, as well as being the foundation of his whole theology.

IV. Mystery as the Foundation of the Christian Faith and Life

In providing a panorama of de Lubac's whole life and how it shaped and influenced his theology, Aidan Nichols proposes that de Lubac's concern for *unity* in all aspects stands as the center of all his efforts.[72] However, with this articulation of divine revelation, it is possible to dig deeper and claim that something more fundamental lies within it. The concern for unity in de Lubac is rooted in a deeper and firmer foundation: the desire to comprehend and live in the mystery of the God who reveals Himself.[73] To show this rootedness, three aspects will be briefly discussed: the human person's understanding of his own existence, the relationship between nature and grace (widely known as de Lubac's greatest contribution to theology), and the life of the Church and her final destiny in Christ.

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[71]von Balthasar, *The Theology of Henri de Lubac*, 61.

[72]Nichols, "Henri de Lubac: Panorama and Proposal," 31–32.

[73]Xavier Tilliette, a disciple of de Lubac, emphasizes that what stands as the "guiding thread" of de Lubac's works is "[t]he Idea of God" and the "life of the spirit" (Tilliette, "Henri de Lubac: The Legacy of a Theologican," 336).

First, de Lubac finds this understanding of divine revelation to be the foundation of his understanding of human existence. Returning to the great insights of the ancient and medieval Church on creation, he says that this way of understanding divine revelation also leads us to a certain way of understanding the human being as a *creature*. De Lubac sees the human person as inevitably and strongly linked to the Creator in whose image he is made. This has several implications and consequences for being truly human.[74] Like God in an analogical manner, the human being himself is *incomprehensible*. He is also a mystery, an abyss unto himself. The meaning of his existence is linked to the God who is his true and final end. What he must do is understand his own being in relation to God, in whom alone he can truly understand and see himself.[75] Above all, the ultimate demand placed on the human being as a creature is to enter into the charity of God, i.e., to live His own life of charity, which in a way allows the human being to be moved and elevated towards something outside and above himself.[76] A certain unity is thus established here by the mystery of God: namely, the unity between the human being and God, in whom the former can attain the beatitude which he longs for. In this unity, however, there is distance and nearness, similarity and difference, existing at the same time, or, simply put, a paradox that finds its root in the paradox of the mystery of God.

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[74]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 126–127; de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 127. By extension, de Lubac also notes that in the recognition of all other beings as creatures, one also sees in them a *theophany*, or the manifestation of God Himself (Tilliette, "Henri de Lubac: The Legacy of a Theologican," 336; de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 84; de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 92–93).

[75]de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 12, 16; de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 29–30. In this regard, de Lubac goes back to St. Augustine, who points out that in pursuing the desire for the human being to know himself, one becomes aware only of one thing—that, as a creature, the human being is created only by and for the Creator (see de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 17, 156).

[76]Henri de Lubac, "The Total Meaning of Man and the World," trans. D. C. Schindler, *Communio* 35 (2008): 636–667. See also de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 112–113.

One must note that this unity is fully realized in the recognition and acceptance of the mystery of Christ. He is able to cross the infinite distance that exists—due to their ontological difference and also because of human sin—between God and humanity; Christ grants the human being new life in God through His death and resurrection.[77] It is in and through Christ that this unity is achieved by the grace of the God who reveals himself as Love.

This is inevitably related to the second aspect of the faith which is founded on God's mystery—namely, the relationship between nature and grace, or, for de Lubac, nature and the supernatural. Against the interpretation of Cajetan and Suarez, de Lubac argues that there really is, i.e., ontologically, no *pure nature* that stands apart from the supernatural.[78] He points out that the human being, by its very nature, is ordained towards a supernatural end, thus bearing a "divine vocation."[79] This ordination, however, is granted as *grace* springing forth from the magnanimous God.

De Lubac defends his stand and explains it further in the context of the relationship between God as Creator and the human being as creature. According to de Lubac, the very act of creating the human

[77]de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 39–40. De Lubac further adds that through Christ, the human being comes to know not only God's charity but also the charity that he is called to live and be (see de Lubac, "The Mystery of the Supernatural," 314–315). But more than that, it is also through Christ that the human being comes to fully know himself as such (de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 339).

[78]de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 94–95. De Lubac recognizes the complexity of the term "human nature," saying that, contrary to the modernist commentators of St. Thomas, it is far from being a thing by and unto itself, and which can be equated to all other existing "natures." This complexity, however, can only be seen when nature is understood from the point of view of creation and the richness and mystery of human existence, which, as embodied spirit made in the image and likeness of God, is oriented to God as its end (see de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 69–72; de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature & Grace*, 14–15).

[79]Chantraine, "The Supernatural Discernment of Catholic Thought According to Henri de Lubac," 39.

being is itself grace.[80] But, besides this *datum optimum*, God also grants "another" grace, the *donum perfectum*, which is the ordination of the human being toward his final end which is God Himself.[81]

This should not be taken, however, as a mere superimposition of one thing (*donum perfectum*) over another (*datum optimum*), as if grace is a thing to be merely handed over. For de Lubac, it is clear that, in the act of existing, the human being is ordained towards a supernatural end. But this should not also be taken as identical with nature. He maintains that this ordination to the final end still stands as a separate gift (*donum*) from that which is given (*datum*) to the human being at the moment of creation. Through this articulation, de Lubac is still able to preserve God's gratuity towards the human being without resorting to two separate planes that stand against each other.[82]

We see here de Lubac's solution to the modern problem of nature and grace. Being paradoxical in nature, this solution can only be understood within the logic of gratuity, i.e., the love and magnanimity

[80]de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 100–102.

[81]de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 114–116; Chantraine, "The Supernatural Discernment of Catholic Thought According to Henri de Lubac," 38. Wood points out that de Lubac describes this as a "circumincession." It must be clarified that supernature does not add itself to nature, and yet it is both in unity with and distinction from nature within the human being (de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature & Grace*, 43; Wood, "The Nature-Grace Problematic Within Henri de Lubac's Christological Paradox," 398).

[82]This raises a question: what, then, is the place of *obediential potency*, described as a certain "non-repugnance" toward God and used by Cajetan and other modernist commentators to refer to the natural desire for God that opens the human being towards a supernatural end (Wood, "The Nature-Grace Problematic Within Henri de Lubac's Christological Paradox," 390–391)? For de Lubac, it would be conceptually inadequate to express this natural desire, as this concept is tied to the concept of *pure nature* as a real order separate from a "supernature." He sees this as St. Thomas' own way of explaining the natural desire for God only if there is a purely natural order for the human being, which, as de Lubac shows in the whole *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, would not be the case (Wood, "The Nature-Grace Problematic Within Henri de Lubac's Christological Paradox," 393; de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 182–185).

of God who gives it in the first place. The *donum* granted to the human being is ultimately rooted in its source—namely, the mystery of God who reveals Himself.[83] This enables us to see that nature and grace—or to be more precise, nature and supernatural—are expressions and manifestations of God's mystery as charity, this time in human existence.[84] Furthermore, the paradox between nature and grace is ultimately rooted in the hypostatic union of divine and human natures in Jesus Christ, in whom this paradox is resolved and clearly seen. The relationship between nature and grace is analogous to the relationship between the human nature and the divine nature in Jesus Christ. Most importantly, the ordination of the human being to its supernatural end, which is God's *donum perfectum* given in charity, is seen in Christ's own life, which culminates in His glorification through His passion, death, and resurrection.[85] Thus, one can see here that the unity of nature and grace can only be traced to, and founded in, the mystery of God.

A third aspect which can also be explored and shown to be rooted in the mystery of God is the Church as the Body of Christ. The mystery of God, revealed fully in Christ's glorification on the Cross, is shared by the community which is Christ's own Body with Himself as the head.[86]

De Lubac elaborates this unity further when he says that the Church by its very nature is *Catholic*, i.e., it embraces everyone and does not see itself merely as an association of a select few.[87] Moreover, Christ saves not just people but all of creation—the Church renews the

[83]See de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 262–263; de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature & Grace*, 65.

[84]de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 217–218. On de Lubac's argument regarding the distinction between "nature" and "supernatural," in opposition to "nature" and "supernature," see de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature & Grace*, 37–53.

[85]Wood, "The Nature-Grace Problematic Within Henri de Lubac's Christological Paradox," 401; de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature & Grace*, 81–83.

[86]See de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 39–40, 56–60.

[87]de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 48–53.

world and gathers all of it toward Christ.[88] This enables us to see the call and mission of the Church, as the Body of Christ, to take part in Christ's own mission of uniting the world to Himself as the common and final destiny of all. Here one sees the paradoxical nature of the Church: it is particular and yet universal, in this world but not of this world. These are characteristics that the Church shares analogously and participatively with Christ, who is both human and divine. This unity, expressed in paradoxes, can only be fully understood in God's revelation in Jesus Christ, both immanent and transcendent.

For de Lubac, what stands as the foundation of these three interrelated elements is divine revelation—God's personal self-disclosure that can only be understood in the context of our own encounter with Him in faith. In acknowledging and entering this mystery, we can understand the unity of Christian life in all its aspects, a unity expressed in various paradoxical unities (the human being and God, nature and grace, the Church and Christ, among others) that are already realized and yet still striving to be fully realized. For de Lubac, the final word regarding these paradoxes is yet to be explored and discovered. Like "the deep calling to the deep" (Psalm 42:7), God calls us from the depths of our being to new ways of seeing and experiencing the truth, to a new way of encountering and knowing Him whom we long for.[89]

V. Conclusion

This discussion of de Lubac's theology of revelation brings out a profound truth about God and human existence in relation to Him. Against various forms of atheism of his time, de Lubac points out that the Christian God is infinitely beyond the God that human reason understands. Here de Lubac establishes a distance between God and the human mind, yet this distance opens up the human heart towards

[88]See de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 282–298; Wood, "The Nature-Grace Problematic Within Henri de Lubac's Christological Paradox," 401–402.

[89]See de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 211–212.

a greater and richer affirmation of God—the mystery that summons the human person to a new life and a new way of living. Moreover, the mystery of God who reveals Himself as charity is fully manifested in and through Jesus Christ; this mystery stands as the foundation not just of the knowledge of God but also of the human being himself and the world. De Lubac's articulation of divine revelation thus sheds light on several aspects of the Christian faith and life, especially those we confront and grapple with today.

What emerges from all of this is a unique intellectual attitude towards faith and belief. We can detect in de Lubac's work a fundamental openness to engage the questions of his time, as well as the willingness to provide answers which take into account the early Christian sources and the great theologians of the Church. In his grappling with questions on human existence and its inseparable link with God, de Lubac has left us a great heritage: a commitment to, and passion for, knowledge of the Christian faith which leads to a renewal and reorientation of one's life.

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