

# Charles Taylor and John Milbank: a Footnote

M.F. Sparrow

In his recent study of the sources of the modern identity, Charles Taylor coined the phrase, 'the affirmation of the ordinary life.'<sup>1</sup> He argues that modern culture has been marked not only by a growing recognition of the dignity and worth of human beings but also by a growing recognition of the dignity and worth of the ordinary life—the life of production and reproduction, of work and family. Taylor calls this affirmation of ordinary life 'one of the most powerful ideas in modern civilization.'<sup>2</sup> It has certainly become one of the predominant themes in Catholic theology in the second half of this century.

Taylor notes, however, another 'extremely important fact about modern moral consciousness. . . . We are in conflict, even confusion about what it means to affirm ordinary life.'<sup>3</sup> So for example, Catholics may, almost unanimously, describe the post-Vatican II era as the age of the laity, but particular attempts to live the Gospel in the modern world and to theologize about that experience create storms of controversy. The debates surrounding liberation theology, which with its turn to the economic, social and political life of man is nothing if not an affirmation of ordinary life, are one such example.

One particularly illuminating instance of the debates surrounding the affirmation of ordinary life and liberation theology is Juan Segundo's *Theology and the Church: A Response to Cardinal Ratzinger and a Warning to the Whole Church* (Minneapolis, 1985). In it Segundo responds to the '*Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation*' issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.<sup>4</sup> His response brings to light some of the critical theological issues involved in liberation theology and, more broadly speaking, in the affirmation of ordinary life. The CDF's '*Instruction*' criticizes certain liberation theologies for reducing the Gospel 'to a purely earthly gospel' and fostering a 'secularization of the Kingdom of God.'<sup>5</sup> Segundo, on the other hand, warns that 'the document insists upon a particular theology where the religious and the secular are opposed' (p. 46) and

therefore exhibits a 'harsh dualism' (p. 68). Thus, reading the CDF's *'Instruction'* and Segundo's response highlights both the importance and the difficulty of avoiding the Charybdis of a dualistic compartmentalization of the religious and the secular without crashing into the Scylla of secularism while pursuing 'the affirmation of the ordinary life.'

This particular instance of the debate surrounding liberation theology also provides a concrete illustration of John Milbank's recent thesis about liberation theology found in the eighth chapter of his book, *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason*.<sup>6</sup> Milbank argues that while rightly attempting to overcome the neo-scholastic or two-tier account of the relationship between grace and nature, the main proponents of liberation theology (Gustavo Gutierrez, Juan Luis Segundo and Clodovis Boff) are ultimately guilty of secularizing salvation because they adopt Rahner's and not de Lubac's version of integralism.

What is particularly noteworthy about Segundo's little book is a brief excursus included at the end of the second chapter. In this appendix he locates the origin of his liberation theology, not in Vatican II, but rather in a course on the theology of grace given by Leopold Malevez at Eegenhoven, Louvain in 1953. 'On the intellectual and theological level, what I have always understood as my own 'theology of liberation' began with him—a theology I amplified once I had returned to Latin America' (p. 75). This revelation turns out to be very helpful for understanding how Segundo was influenced by what was essentially a Rahnerian version of integralism.

What was so pivotal about Malevez's course on grace? Segundo notes, 'it was commonly taught . . . that the grace of God lifted the individual to a *supernatural plane*, beginning with the acceptance of faith' (p. 75). Malevez, on the other hand, anticipating Karl Rahner's supernatural existential, argued that not only the acceptance of faith but also the preparation of faith, by which he understood, for example, the human virtues of antiquity, was supernatural. Segundo concludes that this understanding of the supernatural character of the preparation of faith means that 'the entire road travelled by the pagans (guided by good will and love) . . . was already (even though it did not lead to faith) from God, from freely-given grace, and related to the plane of supernatural efficacy' (p. 76). It is then no longer necessary for him to think that 'the vast majority of humanity lived and acted seemingly outside of that divine and saving reality, on the level of 'pure nature' (p. 162).

Malevez's understanding of the supernatural character of the preparation of faith, which placed 'the one who is prepared and that

which is being prepared for on the same level of salvation' (p 77), was and apparently continues to be vital for Segundo's theology. In fact, Segundo claims that 'this interpretation, and only this one, prevents thinking of the history of the world and of the Church, the history of human effort and that of grace and salvation, as two floors in the same building' (p. 84). Furthermore, Segundo seems to think that Malevez's principle is necessary not only for overcoming 'the compartmentalization of the profane and the sacred, of the natural and the supernatural, but also for respecting and embracing the joy and hope, the grief and anguish' (*Gaudium et Spes*, I ) of humanity' and for becoming anthropocentric without ceasing to be authentically theocentric (p. 77).

Segundo, however, makes a fundamental error. He claims, following what he understands to be Malevez's position, that not only the acceptance of faith but also its preparation is supernatural *because* 'no one truly can be prepared for something that absolutely is above him or her, something that by definition is beyond the individual's possibilities and destiny' (p.75). In effect, he seems to think one cannot have a natural preparation for a supernatural end.

This principle—that no one is prepared or begins something that totally exceeds his or her possibilities' (p. 76)—lies then at the foundation of Segundo's liberation theology, but it is not as indisputable as Segundo seems to indicate.<sup>7</sup> One can, for example, turn to the text of Aquinas to find several instances of natural preparations for that which exceeds nature and comes only from God. On this point, Aquinas's text is perhaps easier to see clearly because of the work done by Henri de Lubac in his *Surnaturel* and because the controversies surrounding de Lubac's work, which were raging when Segundo took his course in 1953, have subsided.

In order to find discussions of preparations in the text of Aquinas one must first know that 'in its proper sense preparation implies a disposition.'<sup>8</sup> According to St. Thomas, there is a disposition of matter from which a form cannot be educed into act except by God. 'There is a natural form, namely, the rational soul, which is brought into being by creation and whose matter is disposed by nature.'<sup>9</sup> Likewise one can speak of dispositions of the possible intellect, some of which can only be perfected by the action of God. The *per accidens* truths of faith (truths about God that can be known through the use of natural reason) can be described as the disposition of the intellect for the *per se* truths of faith (truths about God which completely exceed the grasp of human reason). Here then are two examples of natural preparations for that which comes only from God.<sup>10</sup> One can also include another example—

that passage so often quoted by Henri de Lubac, 'the soul is naturally capable of grace'<sup>11</sup> if one remembers that a disposition or preparation is that which renders a thing capable of being acted upon.

Segundo's fundamental error is, then, the following. In the effort to overcome the compartmentalization of the natural and the supernatural and to avoid seeing men on the level of 'pure nature,' he accepts an axiom—no natural preparation for the supernatural—which has its origins in the point of view from which he is trying to escape. He succumbs to the danger, so common in theological controversies, of refuting one's opponent while making implicit concessions to his point of view.<sup>12</sup>

Segundo is, however, correct in one very important regard. It is indeed a mistake to think of the 'the history of the world and of the Church, the history of human effort and that of grace and salvation, as two floors in the same building' each possessing its own proper ends, just as it is mistake to think of the natural and supernatural life of a man as two floors in the same building, each with its own proper ends. Seeing the natural order—be it that of human nature or human history—as possessing its own proper natural, secular, temporal end results ultimately in secularism because the supernatural becomes something superadded, extraneous and therefore easily ignored or deemed irrelevant.<sup>13</sup> The compartmentalization of the religious and the secular, of the natural and the supernatural, seems to lead inexorably to secularism. Ironically, even Segundo's theology results ultimately in secularism—after all, it too is based, although unwittingly, on the nature/supernature duality.

Thus, it appears that the only way to avoid, on the one hand, secularism and on the other, the compartmentalization of the natural and the supernatural is to realize the full implications of de Lubac's work—implications that de Lubac himself never quite realized.<sup>14</sup> In short, it is necessary to see not only human nature but also human actions and human history as having a supernatural destiny. To be Christians in the modern world—to 'affirm' the dignity and worth of the ordinary life—we must see its proper end. Only then is it possible to become, as Segundo himself desires, anthropocentric without ceasing to be authentically theocentric.

1 See especially Part 111 entitled, 'The Affirmation of Ordinary Life' in Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 211–304.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 23–24.

4 For an English version see *Origins*, 14 (1984): 193–204.

- 5 'Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation,' VI, 4 and X, 6.
- 6 See 'Founding the Supernatural: Political and Liberation Theology in the Context of Modern Catholic Thought' in John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 206–255.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- 8 Thomas Aquinas, *Q.D. De Verit.* 6.1 ad 8: 'Ad octavum dicendum quod praeparatio importat, proprie dispositionem.'
- 9 Thomas Aquinas, *Q.D. De Pot.* 3.4 ad 7: '. . . aliqua forma naturalis est quae per creationem in esse producitur, scilicet anima rationalis, cujus materiam natura disponit.'
- 10 For a more detailed argument see M.F. Sparrow, 'The Proofs of Natural Theology and the Unbeliever,' *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 65, no. 2 (Spring, 1991): pp. 129–141.
- 11 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I–II, q. 113, a. 10: '. . . naturaliter anima est gratiae capax.'
- 12 De Lubac comments on this danger in his *Catholicism: A Study of Dogma in Relation to the Corporate Destiny of Mankind* (London: Burns & Oates, 1950), p. 166.
- 13 See, for example, de Lubac, pp. 166–167 and Joseph Komonchak's discussion of this theme in de Lubac, 'Theology and Culture at Mid-Century: The Example of Henri De Lubac,' *Theological Studies* 51 (1990), pp. 579–602.
- 14 On de Lubac's failure to realize the full implications of his work see Milbank, pp. 206–209 and p. 226.

## Newman on *doing* theology

### Thomas O'Loughlin

Newman's writings on the nature of theology, the role of the theologian in the Church, and the nature of personal faith and assent, all receive a great deal of scholarly attention. However, one text where he characterises the nature of the work of a theologian as a continuing activity has been passed over in studies of his writings on theology and seems only to be known in studies of his marian doctrine.

The text is from the Sermon 15 of his *University Sermons*<sup>1</sup> which was preached on the feast of the Purification, 2 February, 1843 upon the text: 'But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart' (Lk 2:19). The sermon begins by introducing the notion of Mary as a pattern of faith (paragraph 1) and then develops the theme by reflection on the significance of Mary "pondering" what was said to her (paragraph 2).