

ON FINDING GOD

Reflections on Father de Lubac's 'Sur les Chemins de Dieu'

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THIS book¹ gives one the deepest kind of delight. It is intensely moving spiritually and morally. Too often the word of God, which in the Scriptures moves us so compellingly, seems to lose all its power when clothed in theological language. The book that can present theological truths so that they move the spirit to love and follow God with spontaneous joy is a rare exception: among such works in English I remember the books of Dom Anscar Vonier. Many attempts make shipwreck at the start by relying on a pious emotionalism foreign to the theological truth itself. Here, however, in Father de Lubac's *Sur les Chemins de Dieu*, theology moves the soul by its own power, by the presence of God's word within it. Fr de Lubac succeeds in the task he explicitly set himself: to help men to find God, not merely to indicate to them that there is a God to find. He convinces the reader experimentally of a difference between proving God's existence and revealing God as present and essential in our own lives. He succeeds in showing that God is not just a need of the human mind, but *my* need.

This is what Fr de Lubac would most want to hear, I think, from someone who has read his book: and he would be prepared, I am sure, to enter into discussion about difficulties and infelicities of expression with anybody sincerely concerned to enhance the book's power to lead souls to God. Behind the rather unmoving nature of what follows, there lurks such a concern.

What might be called the setting of this book is found in the traditional Christian doctrine of man as made in the image of God. This has never meant merely that man has some similarity of powers, some analogy of essential structure with God—if indeed to say such a thing is meaningful at all. It means rather that the whole being of man is engaged, or can and should be engaged, in reflecting back God to God. Other creatures come out from God, obeying a word they could not hear: 'Let there be

¹ *Sur les Chemins de Dieu*. By Henri de Lubac, S.J. (Aubier, 1956.) A much revised and expanded 3rd edition of *De la Connaissance de Dieu*. (Témoignage Chrétien, 1945, 1948.)

light. . . . And there was light'. Man alone can hear the word and can attend to it, not only in himself but in all other things. He can detect the presence of God speaking in the depths of man's spirit, creation becomes a revelation to which man responds by hearing, God illuminates his spirit and his spirit reflects God. Quoting a Dominican, Father Paissac, Fr de Lubac talks of an *habitude de Dieu*, a disposition unto God, existing in the spirit before any act, a gift of God belonging to the very nature of the spirit, making it an image of God. Fr de Lubac calls this most frequently a 'fundamental affirmation' of God in the depths of spirit, an affirmation lived rather than expressed. But he is careful to say that this 'affirmation' can only become conscious of itself, recognize and identify itself in particular acts of the mind; in itself it is rather a receiving than a doing, a being open to God substantially, a welcome, a primordial passivity. The particular acts of mind in which it makes itself explicit may themselves be of affirmative form, as for example the assertions which conclude the proofs that God exists. But also, and most importantly, they can be negative in form, denials that God is like any creature he has made. Fr de Lubac here joins with St Thomas in teaching that we know about God rather what he is not than what he is. Such negations, Fr de Lubac argues, gain their true significance from the deep, spiritual affirmation which underlies them. Without such an affirmation subsisting beneath and within them, one would not be able to distinguish man's stuttering statements of God's transcendence from pure agnosticism.

Fr de Lubac's treatment gains in power here from the way in which its relevance to the twentieth-century dilemma is pointed out. In a chapter of genius at the end of the book, Fr de Lubac's theological statements and the present-day world are made to illuminate one another. It may seem as if the secularization of the world is driving God completely away: Fr de Lubac asks whether we cannot even here see a revelation of the abyss that God is, beyond all our intellectual gropings to express him. 'Every time that men have abandoned some system of thought they have imagined that they have lost God. . . . Such systems however disappear because they are inadequate to express the being of things, above all because their idea of God does not measure up to God himself. Always there remains the living spirit, and hence equally there remains the God who is imposing him-

self on that spirit'. It is at times such as ours when the systems are especially in flux that the recognition of their inner motivation, the deep aspiration toward God in the spirit itself, becomes easiest. What are continuously conquered by the secularizing elements in the world are 'isms' about God. But when an 'ism' of God goes under, 'when the cause of God is vanquished, then truly God triumphs, for he becomes his own defender'. God is not the Christian's 'ism' as dialectical materialism is the Marxist's. Christ was not God's representative in the way Marx represented Communism. Christ and the saints were not advertising something, not throwing light on to some object; rather they were re-presenting God, shining forth to man the presence of God.

Here perhaps we see the essential point that Fr de Lubac is getting at. God is not just another object for thought; God is a presence to be lived with, provoking communion, calling for converse. The pejorative use of the word 'object' here can be referred to its use in such phrases as 'the object glass of a microscope'; God is not an object for analysis in the sense that the plant is an object for dissection. For God is really known in his creation not when I set to work to analyse it as given material (surprisingly *there*, where there might have been nothing) demanding explanation, but rather when God's presence imposes itself on me as I suffer and enjoy the presence of the world itself. 'Reasoning by itself, if I were the only agent involved, would give only abstract and indirect knowledge. It would furnish a mere concept substituting for an *absent* being. What really happens is that beneath the abstraction, for which I am responsible, the true God reveals his own presence'—not now as an object, an *It*, but as a *Thou*, as trans-subjective. A deism for which God is no more than a part of the objective scheme of explanation of the world is not worthy of God. And this is one of the most powerful factors in its defeat and destruction. It is not adequate to that innermost resonance of the human spirit to a God mysteriously present, a God not just dead matter for the mind, but focussing all the spiritual and moral movement in man.

This in the briefest outline—all its life lost, but its position marked down—is what Fr de Lubac wants to say. This is the account he wishes to give of our fundamental knowledge and need of God. He would have us believe, at times, that it is an account which goes behind any differences of theological school,

Thomist or Augustinian, and expresses something fundamental to the Christian tradition. And yet even on his own showing this is something he surely cannot do. 'Giving an account' of the basic capacity of man's spirit is a process of 'identifying' it, 'recognizing' it in explicitly formulated intellectual terms. It is precisely as intellectual formulations that Thomism and Augustinianism differ. It is clear that Fr de Lubac must make his choice. In fact he *does* make it, and he himself knows he makes it, and refers to it explicitly when he characterizes St Thomas's attempt to identify man's basic spiritual aspiration with the natural desire to know as doomed to failure. He chooses the Augustinian side. And he chooses, I think, wrongly.

The full peculiarity of this choice comes out in the ambiguous way the fundamental affirmation of the spirit has to be described. It is at once 'thought', in some deep sense of the word, and thus action, operation; and yet it is also the 'being' of man, passivity, capacity. Now I have no wish to deny that in the depths of the soul there is a mysterious union of activity and passivity, that at the very root of the soul's activity it is reflecting within itself God's activity, making response to God. But then, is it not this doubleness in the depths of the soul that St Thomas is thinking of when he distinguishes the essence of the soul from its spiritual powers? The spiritual powers of the soul can reflect on the soul itself, and upon God's act of creation within the soul: they see his image there, they hear his word and answer. But the first stirrings of response are already the intellect's work. There is no need for a more basic response than the intellectual one. It is no argument against this that there is also a power of willing and loving to be considered. One might say: the power of intellect is not fully adequate to the task of response, we must go back to a primal unity of response of which intellect and will are only two partial actualizations. But will and intellect are not two partial motions translating a more fundamental unity in the soul; they are two fulfilments each totally adequate in different ways to the task of response. It is not true therefore to say that intellect, left to itself, would only achieve objective being, requiring the resonance of spiritual desire, spiritual appreciation (that is to say, of will), to make it trans-subjective. The intellect is already defined as a faculty of presence to trans-subjective being as such: for the will, and the will's resonances, and the will's object are all included

within the intellect in an intellectual way, just as the intellect and its object are contained within the will in the will's way. The abstraction involved in considered intellect and will separately does not mean that when one is in view the other is not there at all, but that when one is in view the other is seen in the light of it. Nothing is left out in the consideration. In other words, the depths of the intellect are not something beyond which we must dive yet deeper; there is not a more fundamental trunk of spirit from which the power has branched. What is true is that the intellect has a spiritual significance *within* it, it itself has significance for the whole spiritual substance; but it has not a greater affirmation or thought beyond and behind it. Fr de Lubac's choice of language to 'render an account' of the spiritual significance of intellect and thought must be re-examined. Especially should there be criticism of words suggesting that without the will the intellect is imperfect in its own line of work. Without advertence to its spiritual significance one would have a very limping idea of the mind, but that significance is not to be sought outside, behind, beyond, or beneath the intellect. I would want to say then, not that I have a faculty of being because I have a more fundamental capacity of God; but that the spiritual significance for me of my intellect and will—my faculties of being—is that they are my capacity for God. I would want to say, not that the proofs of the existence of God express and make explicit a more fundamental affirmation of God's presence to me; but that the fundamental spiritual significance of these proofs is that they affirm and reveal God's presence.