



Postliberal Theology and the Church Catholic

CONVERSATIONS WITH

George Lindbeck

David Burrell

Stanley Hauerwas

Edited by John Wright

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Acknowledgments

In the late winter of 1984, Robert Louis Wilken, the professor in my first Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity PhD seminar at the University of Notre Dame, pressed into my hand a newly published volume called *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*. I had never heard of the author, a Yale Divinity School professor named George Lindbeck. I finished the book that night. Perhaps this book began there.

In the summer of 1984 I ran into Stanley Hauerwas at the second-floor copier in the Hesburgh Library at the University of Notre Dame. The next day he was to leave South Bend to begin his teaching post at Duke Divinity School. He kindly greeted me and I thanked him for his work, told him that I mourned never being able to study under him in class, and wished him well from one “Wesleyan” to another. Perhaps this book began there.

In the spring of 1991 I shared lunch with David Burrell when I served as a visiting professor teaching general education students at the University of Notre Dame. In the middle of the lunch, David spoke about his relationship with George Lindbeck when Burrell was chair of the Department of Theology at Notre Dame. Perhaps this book began there.

To speak of the beginnings of a book is to recognize how indebted one’s life is to the gift God gives to us in others.

Acknowledgments remind us that none of our work is really our own, particularly one like this book. First, I need to thank George Lindbeck, David Burrell, and Stanley Hauerwas for their graciousness as they gathered for a conversation in the winter of 2007 in Kansas City, Missouri. While I had known David and Stanley when sojourning at the University of Notre Dame, I had never formally been their student; I had never even spoken to Professor Lindbeck until I called him in his retirement to inquire about his interest in taking part in a conversation with David and Stanley. Yet all three agreed to come to engage in these conversations only upon my request. Ron Benefiel, then president of Nazarene Theological Seminary, offered to sponsor the conversation that took place under the Hugh C. Benner endowed lectureship in memory of Hugh C. Benner, the founding president of NTS. Ironically, a “Benner scholarship” had helped pay for my undergraduate education at Mount Vernon Nazarene College. It was an honor to have the late Dr. Benner’s daughter, Janet Miller, his son, Dr. Richard Benner, and his daughter-in-law, Dr. Patricia Benner, in attendance for the conversations.

Dr. John Hawthorne, then provost at Point Loma Nazarene University, provided early encouragement for the project, and later, paid travel expenses out of the Provost’s Fund at PLNU for my participation in it. Monsignor Lorenzo Albacete of Communion and Liberation discussed the project with me in its early stages and enthusiastically embraced it. Monsignor Albacete was to interview Drs. Lindbeck, Hauerwas, and Burrell. Unfortunately he became ill immediately before the event and was unable to attend. I was required to stand in for him. Dr. Andy Johnson, professor of New Testament at Nazarene Theological Seminary, did the unrecognized work, for which I am thankful, in overseeing the local logistics for the entire event.

It has taken me too long to turn these interviews into this book. Perhaps it never would have been completed without a sabbatical granted by my institution, Point Loma Nazarene University. Jason Byassee, who attended the conversation, provided early encouragement to record the conversations in book

form. Rodney Clapp guided the work through the contractual and editorial processes at Baker Academic and provided wise editorial suggestions. Professor Hauerwas read drafts of the chapters and provided encouragement and feedback. Dr. Mark Mann, director of the Wesleyan Center at Point Loma Nazarene University, provided keen eyes for reading portions of early drafts of the book, as did my young friend Professor Jonathan Tran of Baylor University. He is a much better judge of my writing than of NBA players. My wife, Rev. Kathy Wright, provided help in transcribing the oral conversations from NTS into typed prose, as did my daughter, Natasha Wright. To share in this project with them and my sons, Johnny, Carl, and Tony, has been a deep joy.

The book is dedicated to my wife of over thirty-one years, Rev. Kathy Wright. She has unswervingly supported me in this book as throughout all life. When she proclaims the Word of God in her preaching at the Church of the Nazarene in Mid-City, California, she helps me see why such a project is important. When she oversees pastors working harmoniously together in one building for seven different congregations from various regions throughout the world in a strange place called “San Diego,” she helps make this work intelligible. For her witness and her help in this project, all I can do is give God thanks.

John W. Wright
Trinity Sunday, 2011



Introduction

Back to the Future

If modern philosophy can be seen as “post-medieval,” then “post-modern” philosophy will have to be read as “post (post-medieval).”

—David Burrell¹

It is hard enough to understand the past, let alone predict the future. Who in the middle of the 1980s predicted the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1989? Looking back on the series of economic bubbles in the past twenty years, we now wonder why mainstream economists did not see the housing bubble that formed in the early 2000s. This inability to see what seems evident in retrospect has led to economic chaos throughout the world. It seems safe to say that unexpected, utterly contingent

1. David Burrell, “Religion and the University,” *Crosscurrents* 56, no. 2 (Summer 2006), 157, available at <http://www.crosscurrents.org/burrellsummer2006.pdf>.

events characterize history more than the smooth, gradual statistical slopes of progress and decline.² History, like life, is full of surprises.

Interpreted from within the history of a visible church catholic, the twentieth century proved both horribly grievous and delightfully surprising. The sufferings of the first half of the century paved the way for healing a thousand years of increased fragmentation in the ecclesial body of Christ. Yet the later part of the century witnessed new fissures in the church, even as God changed its social location from its medieval European centers to the Southern hemisphere and Asia.

It seems almost bizarre today to raise the question of the visible unity of the church. Rifts within the church throughout history appear too deep, and the truthfulness of theological claims seems unintelligible when analyzed solely in light of the immanent working of power in history. The question of the visible unity of the church in faith and order seems at best nostalgic, and at worst reactionary and oppressive. Theological discourse in the West has tended to emphasize vague humanistic ethical goods like “freedom” or “justice”; it has also sought to develop a marketable “group-identity” for self-identification, meaning, and proselytism. “Denominations” seem natural, so natural that even those within the Roman Catholic Church can call themselves part of a “denomination.”

In 1984 a theologian little known outside of ecumenical circles, George Lindbeck, published a small volume named *The Nature of Doctrine*. Lindbeck’s book sought to bridge earlier Christian divisions, but did so in an inverse direction from the general movement of Western culture, the Western academy, and the church, particularly in the United States. The volume quickly attracted attention far beyond what the author had

2. See, for instance, Nissim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House, 2007); Thomas Kuhn, *The Structures of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); and various works by Michel Foucault, for instance, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1975).

anticipated. It became a lightning rod both for what it advocated—a “postliberal approach” to Christian doctrine—and for what it criticized—“propositional-cognitive” and especially “experiential-expressivist” theological methods. Lindbeck’s volume inadvertently touched a raw nerve that ran through theological and ecclesial circles.³ As Lindbeck himself has commented, “The book seems to the left as a direct assault and by the right as a Trojan horse.”⁴

In the 1980s theological scholarship was preoccupied with issues of method. Scholars quickly linked Lindbeck’s work with that of his colleague at Yale, Hans Frei, and created a so-called Yale School. This new “school” of theology supposedly provided a new theological method based on a general theory of religion—a communally enclosed, intratextual, mediating theology. Interpreters separated Lindbeck’s book from the pre-1960s theological movements that Lindbeck and his colleagues sought to advance, movements related to the ecumenical program found in the Lima Document of the World Council of Churches and its Catholic version in Vatican II.

The term *postliberal theology* still generates heat. Over twenty-five years after Lindbeck’s publication, some continue to promote “postliberal theology” while others have declared and celebrated its demise.⁵ Perhaps we should have expected the irony that a book on ecumenism would heighten fundamental divisions within Christian theological discourse. Lindbeck recognized that new Sunderings had occurred in the Western

3. For a thorough review of the controversy in relation to Lindbeck’s work, see Paul J. DeHart, *The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 32–41.

4. George Lindbeck, “Foreword to the German Edition of *The Nature of Doctrine*,” in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. James Buckley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 196.

5. Even though Paul J. DeHart spoke in 2006 of “the dismantling of postliberalism” (*Trial of the Witnesses*, 276), within the next year two books appeared that consciously identified themselves as “postliberal,” one from a Protestant theologian (William Placher, *The Triune God: An Essay in Postliberal Theology* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007]) and one from a Roman Catholic theologian (Robert Barron, *The Priority of Christ: Toward a Postliberal Catholicism* [Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007]).

church in the past two centuries that both simplified and complicated its previous divisions (especially from the sixteenth century onward).

This book seeks to place postliberal theology within the broader stream of the “Tradition of the Great Church.”⁶ Postliberal theology, as we have known it, is radically liberal—a movement of updating the faith given to the saints—at the same time that it is radically conservative—nothing less than a return to the normative historical sources of the faith. It seeks to faithfully carry on the life of the church catholic, especially as seen in the lives of the saints—including those saints that many would call “Protestant.” While both Protestant and Catholic, postliberal theology is neither Protestant nor Catholic in the way these distinctions have been defined in the past several centuries. Its greatest achievement has passed with barely a yawn—the World Lutheran Confederation and the Catholic Church’s Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999).

6. In his introduction in *Scripture, Creed, Theology: Lectures on the History of Christian Doctrine in the First Centuries*, ed. George A. Lindbeck (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), Lindbeck speaks of the “Great Church” as

a relatively unified mainstream gradually coalescing in the course of the second century out of an initial multiplicity of often-competing groups claiming to be not only Christian but also, in the most significant cases, apostolic and catholic. . . . It grew in the course of the third century to embrace the vast majority of Christians. Naturally it defined orthodoxy for subsequent generations. It viewed its understanding of the faith as in continuity with that of the apostles and treated those who disagreed (that is, heretics) as innovators who had distorted the faith once for all delivered to the saints. These seeming innovators, however, can sometimes be plausibly represented as survivors or conservers, marginalized heirs of versions of Christianity no less ancient than those to which the majority appealed. If they can be so understood, then doctrinal development is a matter of constructing orthodoxy rather than of developing (as Catholics since Newman have held) or distorting (as such liberal Protestants as von Harnack have maintained) the original deposit or experience of faith. (lxii–lxiii)

Significantly, Lindbeck continues, “the communities that developed in the ‘orthodox’ Great Church had no political, cultural, social or economic advantages; indeed, they seem to have been the most persecuted of the professedly Christian groups. Their victory can be plausibly—perhaps most plausibly—explained as a function of their success in constructing unity-and-community-constituting polities, canonical scriptures, liturgies, and rules of faith” (lxiii).

This theological program grew out of and developed its ecumenical potential as a response to a divided church whose witness was helpless—a church that had even supported the devastation that World War II wrought upon the world. For the postliberals Christian language is not merely verbal, but is encoded within the embodied life and practices of the ecclesial body and its individual members. The Christian witness to peace is inextricably bound to the ability of the church to live, speak, and confess in harmony. Postliberal theology addresses concerns for the unity of the church within a world devastated by violence and war.⁷

Postliberal theology, however, is not a nostalgic apologetics withdrawn from the philosophical and intellectual currents of the last half of the twentieth century. The first-generation

7. Robert Cathey, *God in Postliberal Perspective: Between Realism and Non-Realism* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), has helpfully described postliberalism as “a set of shared convictions rooted in historic and contemporary Christian communities and some common tendencies in method (philosophic and theological).” He describes in depth the “family resemblance” of the three postliberals that he engages, David Burrell, William Placher, and Bruce Marshall:

All are Trinitarians, yet with different emphases on the unity of God and Trinity of Persons. . . . They all distance themselves, explicitly or implicitly, from the strong revisions in the doctrine of God proposed by process theism. . . . All share a concern for how Christian testimony to God as Trinity engages religious pluralism, especially in relation to Jewish and Islamic testimony and reflection. All bring Scripture and Christian reflection into conversation with philosophy. But they seek to transform philosophical water into the wine of theology. . . . They share a common concern for the particularity of Christian convictions, language, and witness to God’s reality in the world, but apply those convictions to all of reality, not merely the subjectivity of believers or the inter-subjectivity of the Christian community. From a contextual basis (Christian community, Scripture, and tradition), they make universal claims . . . yet do not appeal to foundations of certainty to justify those claims. Their approaches to the justification of contextual beliefs differ, but they all ascribe a role to the Holy Spirit in turning sinful creatures by various ways toward the truth, who is Jesus Christ. Their dialogue partners are both past (Aquinas, Barth) and present (any reader with some background in philosophy, world religions, or theology; fellow Christians and some Jewish and Islamic scholars share their interests). If theology is an ellipsis with two foci, one called “tradition” and the other called “the present context,” their privileged focus is tradition (Scripture, creeds, liturgy, past theological masters), but their thought keeps moving around the ellipsis bringing both foci into dialogue. (123–24)

postliberal theologians discussed and interviewed in this volume have not withdrawn into their own fideistic, churchy intellectual ghetto. Though deeply rooted in the tradition of the Great Church, postliberal theologians have produced an old/new theological discourse through special attention to language. The postliberals have drunk deeply from the well of twentieth-century Anglo-American analytic philosophy, particularly as it intersects with the thought of Thomas Aquinas. Although the analytic philosophical tradition has dominated mainstream Anglo-American *philosophical* discourse, theologians—largely shaped by engagement with continental philosophy—have tended to neglect its theological helpfulness and have thus overlooked the analytic, Thomistic background for postliberal theology.

The purpose of this book is to reestablish postliberal theology's concern for the visible unity of the church catholic. The book centers on biographical interviews with George Lindbeck, David Burrell, and Stanley Hauerwas and a conversation between them on the present/future unity of the church.

As mentioned above, Lindbeck is the Yale Divinity School professor who coined the term *postliberal theology*. He has worked tirelessly for the visible unity of the church through his own writings and in ecumenical dialogues and working groups.

Professor Stanley Hauerwas is Gilbert T. Rowe Professor of Theological Ethics at Duke Divinity School; he is often linked with the postliberal program, and not without reason given the continual positive references to *The Nature of Doctrine* throughout his books. Hauerwas received cultural recognition (unusual for a contemporary theologian) when he was named “Best Theologian in America” in 2002 by *Time* magazine.

Our final theologian, David Burrell, does not regularly appear in the discussions of “postliberal” theologians.⁸ An expert in the work of Thomas Aquinas, particularly as an exemplar of

8. An exception is the insightful work by Robert Cathey, *God in Postliberal Perspective*, particularly 124–37. The following interviews confirm Cathey's hypothesis about “Lindbeck's dependence on Burrell's interpretation” of Thomas and his doctrine of analogy (62n28).

Christian dialogue with Jews and Muslims, Burrell has worked at the boundaries of philosophy, historical philosophy and theology, interreligious dialogue, and contemporary theology. Burrell's significance within contemporary theology is generally underestimated. His friendships with both Lindbeck and Hauerwas, however, highlight the vitality of the analytic philosophical transformation of Thomistic thought in which all three theologians participate. He has coauthored essays for thirty years with Hauerwas, and his book *Aquinas: God and Action* was long used by Lindbeck in regular doctoral seminars on Thomas Aquinas at Yale.⁹ The interviews stress the intersection of Burrell's life and thought with that of Lindbeck and Hauerwas, two recognized "postliberal" theologians. Renewed interest in Thomistic theology in recent decades has made their shared theological tradition more evident. As Burrell has stated, if the modern was fundamentally post-medieval, then the postmodern is the post (post-medieval). In the return, we learn to go forward.

From the perspective of this particular retrieval of Thomistic thought, the name *postliberal* as a theological school or method is a misnomer. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Roman Catholic history and theology had formed itself as a bastion against liberal thought and politics. A neo-Thomist perspective dominated pre-Vatican II Catholicism, strongly distinguishing between nature and grace, philosophy and theology. Neo-Thomism held that grace built upon the foundation of nature like a *parfait*; philosophy provided a universal rationality upon which the church could then add specific claims based on revelation. Such a Catholicism would interpret postliberalism as a hopeless capitulation to the modernist tradition—as have some, not accidentally, within conservative Protestant circles.

9. In the foreword to the second edition, Burrell notes, "This exploration of Thomas Aquinas's philosophical theology, decidedly 'unorthodox' at the time of its original publication, had the good fortune to be employed extensively, notably at Yale and Cambridge, by my eminent colleagues George Lindbeck and Nicholas Lash" (David B. Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action*, 2nd ed. [Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2008]).

Lindbeck's, Burrell's, and Hauerwas's works are postliberal only from the perspective of late twentieth-century European and American thought and ecclesial life.

Of course, if postliberalism is a misnomer, then the term "Yale School" has even less utility.¹⁰ While all three persons' lives intersected with Yale University, they had little direct relationship with each other at the time. A depth of friendship and interaction characterized the relationship of George Lindbeck to another member of the "Yale School," Hans Frei, but their theological programs and backgrounds differed radically. Lindbeck writes as an ecumenist from his training in medieval Catholic thought, particularly under the impact of Thomas Aquinas; Frei writes as a historian of modern Christian thought, particularly under the impact of Karl Barth.

The title *postliberalism* itself grants too much to the obsession with methodological schools that arose in the 1970s as a result of cultural, intellectual, and institutional shifts (which these three thinkers have resisted). It reduces their theological thought to a contemporary option available for individual choice if so suited—an item on the menu of expressive entrées for scholarly or pastoral consumption. Perhaps it is more accurate to speak of "postliberalism" as a contemporary retrieval of Augustinian Thomism through interaction with twentieth-century linguistic philosophy.¹¹

The theologians discussed in this book provide a trajectory for theological thought and ecclesial life from the center of the Western Christian theological tradition. These thinkers also adopted certain movements within twentieth-century analytic philosophy as tools to help promote the visible unity of the church. In words that characterized the renewal of the Catholic

10. DeHart helpfully notes this point in his discussions of the distinctions between the theological programs of Hans Frei and George Lindbeck. See *Trial of the Witnesses*, esp. 242–45.

11. For the propriety of this convergence, see the wonderful essay by Joseph In-candela, "Similarities and Synergy: An Augustinian Reading of Aquinas and Wittgenstein," in *Grammar and Grace: Reformulations of Aquinas and Wittgenstein*, ed. Jeffrey Stout and Robert MacSwain (London: SCM, 2004), 20–54.

Church at Vatican II, the theologians have lived and written as a means of *aggiornamento* (the updating of the language of the faith) through *ressourcement* (a return to the vital sources of the Christian tradition in Scripture and the Great Church). They have done so in order to work toward a visibly united church in our sojourn through the late modernity of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

The historical depth, intellectual vitality, contemporary relevance, and theological and philosophical truthfulness of Professors Lindbeck, Burrell, and Hauerwas only partially explain the attention and controversy that have attended the reception of their texts. Their analytic Augustinian Thomism provides a faithful expression of the Christian tradition and is an excellent intellectual resource for responding to the increased pluralism and secularism of North America and Europe. By granting insight into the histories of three central postliberal theologians, this book endeavors to help others within the church, novice and learned, to access this tradition as a means to witness creatively amid the “time between the times” in which we live. To understand both the power of their witness and the controversies they have spawned, we have to understand how they maintained a theological agenda that was deeply undercut by various cultural and institutional shifts in Western society in the 1960s. It is to this wider intellectual, cultural, and institutional background that we will turn as a context for the individual stories and observations that follow.



The Silent Shifting of Tectonic Plates

“Let us imagine that the tectonic plates of our culture are shifting in such a way as to encourage Christians once again to return to their ecumenical roots.”

George Lindbeck¹

It is perhaps hard for North Americans to understand the theological trauma suffered in the church in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. North American theologians have reflected extensively on Christian theological complicity in the atrocity of the Shoah. However, the violence of Christians killing Christians in World Wars I and II has not occasioned prolonged reflection, perhaps because of a deeply held conviction

1. George Lindbeck, “The University and Ecumenism,” in *Justification and the Future of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. William G. Rusch (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 10.

of American exceptionalism that justified the violence of the Allied cause. The military devastation of Europe, North Africa, and western and eastern Asia, however, made the tragedy of the fragmented church obvious for all to see. Perhaps it is not accidental that 1949 found both John Howard Yoder (a leading voice of Christian pacifism) and George Lindbeck in a France devastated by the Vichy regime's cooperation with Nazi Germany. Perhaps it should not surprise us that both became deeply involved in the ecumenical endeavors of the World Council of Churches, and both deeply interfaced with Roman Catholicism. Ecumenicity engaged the finest theological minds of the era, particularly in Europe. The movement toward the visible unity of the church catholic culminated in the Lima Statement of the World Council of Churches in 1961. By this time, Roman Catholicism had also undergone a remarkable inner transformation in order to address the scandal of a divided church whose own life contradicted its witness to the world of the possibilities of reconciliation and peace.²

The lives and theological programs of George Lindbeck, David Burrell, and Stanley Hauerwas come into clearer focus when we understand them in light of the deep cultural, intellectual, and institutional shifts that occurred in Western culture in the 1960s. The three scholars had diverse personal and ecclesial backgrounds; however, pre-1960s philosophical, ecclesial, and theological trends enabled the growth of their common friendship and overlapping interests in the decades that followed. These trends culminated at Vatican II, the twenty-first Ecumenical Council of the Roman Catholic Church. Pope John XXIII called the council in 1959, and Catholic bishops and invited observers attended it in Rome from 1962 through 1965. Vatican II makes clear the threads that hold together the lives and writings of Lindbeck, Burrell, and Hauerwas. Through their work, one discovers how the renewal of the church prayed for

2. See the excellent narrative of how the ecumenical task became central to the mission of the Roman Catholic curia provided by Jerome B. Vereb, *Because He Was German: Cardinal Bea and the Origins of Roman Catholic Engagement in the Ecumenical Movement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

by John XXIII in Vatican II moved silently beyond Roman Catholicism into other branches of the church catholic.

Perhaps this statement surprises us. The reception of Vatican II has been anything but smooth and uncontroversial. From the time of John XXIII's calling of Vatican II to Paul VI's closing of the council, profound, tectonic shifts had occurred in Western culture. These shifts reframed the very institutional context in which theological discourse occurred, particularly in North America. Lindbeck, Burrell, and Hauerwas all have refused to see the new "Age of Authenticity" as normative.³ They instead have continued to develop pre-1960s philosophical and ecclesial trajectories as a means of engaging the contemporary world and renewing the witness of the church catholic. In the process they have swum upstream in the institutional matrix of North American culture. The resistance has not stopped them from continuing their programs, though; they have met their context with a critical intellectual acumen that has made their work difficult to ignore. Yet the institutional and cultural complexity that they have faced has made their work often subject to misunderstanding, much like Vatican II itself. They do not quite fit within the categories that seem natural to post-1960s North American culture, but therein lies the promise of their stories and their work for the future.

Mid-Twentieth Century Theological Renewal in Roman Catholicism: *Ressourcement*, Catholic Ecumenism, and Nature and the Supernatural in the *Nouvelle Théologie*

To begin our discussion of the first-generation postliberals with pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic thought may seem bizarre. Only Burrell is Roman Catholic (though his life and thought are intelligible only in light of the post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church); Lindbeck is Lutheran; and Hauerwas, Methodist-Episcopal. Their work, however, continues the insights found within a particular constellation of largely French Roman Catholic theologians who

3. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 473–504.

began their careers before Vatican II and remained active within and after the council. This loose group of thinkers shared a family resemblance in their active, academic theological work for the church, which was called the “*nouvelle théologie*”⁴ or the *ressourcement* (a return to the classical, historic sources of the life of the church) movement.⁵ Lindbeck, Burrell, and Hauerwas did not, however, relegate these theologians to an isolated niche as historical “Roman Catholic theologians” who engaged inner-Roman Catholic struggles for Catholic identity. The first generation of postliberal thinkers incorporated the basic theological insights of this group into a program that has reached into mainline and evangelical Protestant networks and the North American theological academy and beyond.⁶

4. A. N. Williams, in “The Future of the Past: The Contemporary Significance of the *Nouvelle Théologie*,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 (2005), aptly describes the *nouvelle théologie* not as a movement per se but as a “common sensibility and vision”:

If we are to speak of the *nouvelle théologie*, let alone designate it as a movement of some sort, we must do so with some delicacy, therefore, but these considerations do not in themselves invalidate using the term altogether, for the significance of this theology subsists, not solely in the value of the contributions of individuals, but in the broader trends observable across the work they collectively produced. If it is an exaggeration to speak of a movement in any formal sense, we may still speak of one in the sense of a common sensibility and vision, not a system so much as a spirit. (348)

Such a position concurs with the analysis of Jürgen Mettepenningen:

The expression *nouvelle théologie* is a cluster concept: a banner representing a variety of visions. . . . [T]he core ambition of each of the thinkers discussed in these pages is ultimately the same: to restore contact between theology and the living faith and thus also with the sources of the faith. To this end, the new theologians rejected every theological system that revolved around the system itself rather than around the faith: a system that caused the sources to clot and congeal, that reduced theologians from days long past to an authority while ignoring the actual content of their works in the name of the system. (*Nouvelle Théologie—New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II* [New York: T&T Clark, 2010], 141)

5. Brian Daley has argued that this sensibility was “really about the rediscovery of sacramental modes of thought, through renewed contact with Christian authors who thought and read scripture in sacramental as well as literal terms” (Daley, “The *Nouvelle Théologie* and the Patristic Revival: Sources, Symbols, and the Science of Theology,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 [2005]: 382).

6. Even Protestant evangelical thought has recently taken up interest in and the agenda of the *nouvelle théologie/ressourcement* movement. See, most recently, Hans

Two particular *ressourcement* theologians, Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac, may help us understand the first-generation postliberals in the context of Vatican II.⁷ Avery Cardinal Dulles said of Congar that “Vatican II could almost be called Congar’s Council”;⁸ and David Schindler has pointed to the “near-identical affirmation of an organic relation between Christology and anthropology”⁹ in Vatican II and de Lubac. Though Congar and de Lubac were controversial within Roman Catholicism before Vatican II, their impact is widely acknowledged to be present in the documents of Vatican II. Their influence, however, has been lost as a backdrop for the postliberal theological program.

Congar’s *Divided Christendom*, published in French in 1938, pulled the Roman Catholic Church into twentieth-century ecumenism kicking and screaming—at him. Congar shifted and deepened the terms of the ecumenical discussion, arguing that it concerned the very catholicity of the church. He did so in profoundly Roman Catholic terms, so much so that as Fergus Kerr observes, “it is difficult to imagine why colleagues and authorities in Rome were so worried about Congar’s principles of Catholic ecumenism.”¹⁰ As Douglas Koskela has argued, “Congar re-worked the notion of *vestigia Ecclesiae* to suggest that non-Catholic bodies maintained elements of the genuine church of Christ that allowed an imperfect though real communion with the visible Catholic Church.”¹¹

Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Baker Academic, InterVarsity, and Eerdmans have all developed book series arising out of evangelical interest in *ressourcement*. In mainline North American Protestant thought, one can see this interest in the “canonical theism” of William Abraham and his students. See William Abraham, Jason Vickers, and Natalie van Kirk, eds., *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

7. Mettepenningen places Congar in a “first phase” of the *nouvelle théologie* and de Lubac in a “second phase”; see *Nouvelle Théologie*, 41–47, 77–79, and 95–114.

8. Avery Dulles quoted in Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians: From Neoscholasticism to Nuptial Mysticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 34.

9. David L. Schindler, introduction to Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1998), xxvii.

10. Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, 40.

11. Douglas M. Koskela, *Ecclesiality and Ecumenism: Yves Congar and the Road to Unity* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2008), 12.

Congar denied an invisible, spiritual end for ecumenism. The movement to overcome the sinful fragmentation of the church must “make explicit, perfect and visible that secret and imperfect membership of the Church that is already theirs [Protestants’ and Orthodox’s].”¹² As a result Congar emphasized a dialectic movement between the outward, embodied, visible church on the one hand and its inward, spiritual experiences on the other. Congar did not deny the inward, experiential dynamic as important for ecumenical discussions; rather he saw the outward and external as prior to the internal ontologically (though perhaps not methodologically) for actual ecumenical discussions:

From this point of view of integration in the visible unity of the Church, which must be our ultimate objective, all this is of primary importance. It is quite true that in the Church the outward imparts the inward; dogmas teach and increase faith, sacramental rites teach and augment the inward gift of grace, and so on. But it is also true that dogmas are an outcome and an expression of faith, and all institutions and forms of worship are an outcome and expression of the inward Christian life under the guidance of the Holy Ghost. To find the Church in its completeness we may proceed from the outward form to the inward life, which is the normal way of a Catholic, born within the institution and impelled by the grace of God to find in it the sources of spiritual life. But it is also possible to proceed from the inner realities to their outward and visible expression, and this is obviously the most likely way for world-wide reunion.¹³

For Congar, the outward and visible gives rise to the inward and experiential, but at the same time one may work backwards, for ecumenical purposes, to relate the “inner realities” to these outward and visible expressions.

The search to achieve the visible unity of the church led Congar to study the relationship between “tradition and traditions”

12. M. J. Congar, *Divided Christendom: A Catholic Study of the Problem of Reunion* (London: Centenary, 1939), 259.

13. *Ibid.*, 266.

in the history of the church.¹⁴ Reacting to a strict, ahistorical, propositional notion of doctrine, Congar argued that tradition “in its historical journey, is as much development as it is memory and conservation.”¹⁵ Tradition, even its doctrinal statements, is the church’s passing on of realities already embedded within the concrete life of a particular people:

Tradition . . . is the communication of the entire heritage of the apostles, effected in a different way from that of their writings. We must try to define it more precisely and describe the original way in which it was done. It was not by discursive means, with all the accurate and precise formulation that this allows; it was by means of the concrete experience of life and of the familiar everyday realities of existence. It could well be compared to all that is implied by the idea of upbringing as opposed to instruction.¹⁶

The concern for the visible unity of the church catholic led Congar to recognize that we cannot reduce the church’s tradition—its doctrine, liturgy, life, and ethics—to universal, objective, abstract statements dispersed among various discrete areas of life. Tradition is thicker, more concrete, more embodied: “For tradition to exist—tradition understood as the environment in which we receive the Christian faith and are formed by it—it must be borne by those who, having received it, live by it, and pass it on to others, so that they may live by it in their turn. Tradition, like education, is a living communication whose content is inseparable from the act by which one living person hands it on to another.”¹⁷ The concern for the visible unity of the church sensitized Congar to the realization that the church

14. See Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and Theological Essay* (London: Burns & Oates, 1966). For a recent review of the work, see John Webster, “Purity and Plenitude: Evangelical Reflections on Congar’s *Tradition and Traditions*,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 (2005): 399–424.

15. Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, trans. A. N. Woodrow (1964; repr., San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 122.

16. *Ibid.*, 22.

17. *Ibid.*, 24.

itself was necessarily a concrete, historical, embodied organism visible in the world.¹⁸

The work of the young Congar paved the way for the early writings of Henri de Lubac. Yves Congar's series *Unam Sanctam* published Henri de Lubac's first major book, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, in 1939. Another, later book, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, translated into English in 1967, has impacted English-language theological scholarship more than de Lubac's other works. In this book, de Lubac makes his earlier research on the underlying logic of the relationship between grace and nature (or the supernatural and nature, or God and creation) in the Christian tradition more easily accessible to an English-language audience.

Within a pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic context that had dissociated the natural and supernatural "realms," de Lubac argues that humanity by nature has a supernatural end—a sense of a lack that indicates the desire for God. Some hear him developing categories similar to those in the Protestant liberal and Catholic modernist position. De Lubac, however, argues that isolating the supernatural from nature ultimately leads to collapsing the supernatural into nature, the very logic of Protestant liberal and Catholic modernist thought: "All the values of the supernatural order, all those which characterize the present relationship between man and God in our economy of grace, will be gradually reabsorbed into that 'purely natural' order that has been imagined (and I say 'imagined' advisedly)."¹⁹ Within the categories of modernity, "nature" requires that the

18. Hans Boersma states,

One of Congar's most significant accomplishments was his combination of a sacramental ecclesiology with a salvation-historical focus. Sacramental ontology and history were not mutually exclusive categories for Congar. He maintained that whenever an ecclesiology focused unduly on the Pasch of Christ and on the institution of the Church, the result was a weakening of the sacramental reality (*res*) of the Church; at the same time, a single-minded focus on the Parousia and a corresponding neglect of the visible reality of the Church undermined the historical and provisional character of the Church (*sacramentum*). (Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology*, 280–81)

19. De Lubac, *Mystery of the Supernatural*, 39.

“supernatural” conform to nature’s own givenness: “Everything that now comes to us by the grace of God is thus withdrawn from the ‘supernatural’ properly so called of our present economy, and ‘naturalized.’”²⁰

Revelation becomes collapsed into what nature has already given, and God is placed into the immanent flow of history. Though de Lubac doesn’t explicitly name Protestant liberalism as his target, it seems apparent that he recognizes this logic of “naturalizing the supernatural”²¹ as characteristic of the Protestant liberal tradition: “It seems to me that this line of thinking leads to a natural morality pure and simple, which must tend to be a morality without religion—or at least with only a natural religion ‘which is itself only one natural moral virtue among others.’”²² Karl Barth was not the only theologian in the mid-twentieth century who criticized the basic modernist presuppositions at the core of Protestant liberalism!²³

De Lubac argues that the historical logic of the church on the relationship between the supernatural and nature is exactly the inverse of “naturalizing the supernatural.” Nature always finds its beginning, sustenance, and end in God. We do not move from

20. *Ibid.*, 40.

21. The phrase is taken from John Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (London: Blackwell, 2006), 224. Milbank himself depends upon de Lubac’s work.

22. De Lubac, *Mystery of the Supernatural*, 47.

23. De Lubac writes,

It is chiefly a question of a “historical” immanentism, concentrating completely upon history, and envisaging the end of its development as a “universal reconciliation” which, both in itself and in the means needed to achieve it, would exclude everything supernatural. Where it is sometimes deceptive is when this immanentism of our age easily develops a dialectic of transcendence actually within the human being. It becomes all the more attractive as, presenting itself as the heir of Christianity (at last fully understood), far from rejecting it, it claims at last to fulfill perfectly the hopes awakened by Christ in men’s hearts; and it is all the more formidable in being borne along on the most powerful current of thought in the age, and in presenting itself as making the only valid response to the challenge of historicity. I realize that the only way to “refute” it is by absorption, and I am confident that Christian thinking, once again, will be adequate to the task. (*Ibid.*, xxxvi)

nature in order to explain or grasp the supernatural. Nor are we left with an arational fideism of a theological realm relevant only to faith. Rather, “it is, on the contrary, nature which is explained in the eyes of faith by the supernatural, as required for it.”²⁴ Reason and faith do not correspond to isolated realms of nature and revelation. As the supernatural grounds and exalts nature to its true end in the supernatural, faith ensures and empowers reason. Simultaneously reason empowers faith to operate reasonably so that, together, humans might find the natural end of their temporal life in the eternally Triune God. Nature is never “given”; it is always “gift.”

Like Congar, de Lubac recognizes that this theological position emphasizes the concrete, empirical world in which we live, but a world that is not closed in upon itself—a nature that is never completely “natural.” Creation is held open by nature to that which is radically beyond it, that is, to the God who exceeds the very categories of the human mind: “It is always within the real world, within a world whose supernatural finality is not hypothetical but a fact, and not by following any supposition that takes us out of the world, that we must seek an explanation of the gratuitousness of the supernatural—in so far as the human mind can do so.”²⁵ According to de Lubac, Catholic Christian ontology claims that in creation nature is always already graced; humans manifest this grace with a natural desire for our end in God.

De Lubac emphasizes that this lack—the natural human desire for that which transcends the concrete human being—never determines the character of the divine gift. The created order may make no demands on God. Humans find their true end only in revelation, that is, Jesus Christ:

24. *Ibid.*, 95.

25. *Ibid.*, 62. While de Lubac’s historical analysis sought to uncover the underlying logic or grammar of what Congar would call the “Tradition,” he thought that this grammar itself required that theology always be concrete and embodied: “Theology is not, or ought not to be, a buildup of concepts by which the believer tries to make the divine mystery less mysterious, and in some cases to eliminate it altogether. To reject this idea of theology does not mean that we think of it as something less ambitious, but quite the reverse: it is by rejecting this idea that we lift it above human banality” (178).

In itself that desire remains none the less hidden “in the ontological depths,” and only the Christian revelation makes it possible to interpret either its indications or its meaning correctly. It is revelation which brings a final judgment to bear on all this human evidence: it condemns its *hubris*, estimates its deviations and brings to light its core of truth. Desire to see God, desire to be united with God, desire to be God: we find all these, or similar phrases, outside Christianity and independent of it. But how equivocal they all are!²⁶

Grace enables the concrete, bodily life of a human being to find its end in the body of Jesus Christ in preparation for our final end eternally in God. The real “nature” of the world only becomes manifest to humans through faith in Jesus Christ. As David Schindler states, only in this way may we “secure theologically the truth of creation as understood in the Gospel, which requires a non-divine subject that is nonetheless always already, in the one order of history, invited to participate in the divine trinitarian *communion* revealed in Jesus Christ.”²⁷ According to de Lubac, the historic Christian tradition taught that human beings find their true divine vocation in Jesus Christ: his life, teachings, death, and resurrection.

Congar and de Lubac practiced *ressourcement* to rediscover the “grammar” of the historic Christian tradition before the distortions of modernity. Through their historical research, they sought to address the concrete challenges of the church in the modern world, a world that they had seen destroyed by wars twice during their lives. Their work combined a particular constellation of themes—God and creation, Christology, the unity of the church—to help contribute to the concrete, visible life of the church for the sake of the world. The themes constituted what became the main concerns of the Second Vatican Council.

As the interviews in subsequent chapters will show, Lindbeck, Burrell, and Hauerwas directly and indirectly participated in the theological backdrop that the *nouvelle théologie* helped

26. *Ibid.*, 222.

27. David Schindler, introduction to de Lubac, *Mystery of the Supernatural*, xxvi.

create. This backdrop came together dramatically in the Second Vatican Council. Unknown to anyone at the time, however, the very historical and cultural forces that produced this powerful vision had begun to undermine it by the time the council began disseminating its texts. Even as the *ressourcement* movement, including the work of Karl Barth, came to its fullest expression, it became a subterranean minority voice, particularly in the dominant Protestant academic theology in North America. Lindbeck, Burrell, and Hauerwas, the first generation of the postliberal theologians, implicitly produced and renewed this program decades after it had ceased to be fashionable.

Vatican II, the Culture of Authenticity, and Postliberalism

The ecumenical and the *ressourcement* interests of the *nouvelle théologie* dramatically came together in John XXIII's charge for the Second Vatican Council. In retrospect, one can see that the council faithfully executed the task given to it by John XXIII in his opening speech. The speech moved from the general to the specific: after addressing the nature of previous ecumenical councils, John XXIII emphasized the Second Vatican Council's task to promote "The Unity of the Christian and Human Family." The speech rose to a climax with an extensive quote from St. Cyprian:

The Church, surrounded by divine light, spreads her rays over the entire earth. This light, however, is one and unique and shines everywhere without causing any separation in the unity of the body. She extends her branches over the whole world. By her fruitfulness she sends ever farther afield her rivulets. Nevertheless, the head is always one, the origin one for she is the one mother, abundantly fruitful. We are born of her, are nourished by her milk, we live of her spirit. (*De Catholicae Eccles. Unitate*, 5)

The pope concluded:

Venerable brothers, such is the aim of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, which, while bringing together the Church's

best energies and striving to have men welcome more favorably the good tidings of salvation, prepares, as it were and consolidates the path toward that unity of mankind which is required as a necessary foundation, in order that the earthly city may be brought to the resemblance of that heavenly city where truth reigns, charity is the law, and whose extent is eternity. (Cf. St. Augustine, Epistle 138, 3)²⁸

It was not merely the tensions of the Cold War that framed Vatican II. Vatican II arose from the tragedy of millions of deaths in war that the church—Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox—condoned, or at least was not able to resist from the European epicenter of its medieval heritage.²⁹ Pastoral renewal was to serve the cause of Christian reunion, which was in turn to provide a witness to the unity of humanity, a unity that would make war obsolete. As Fergus Kerr states, John XXIII hoped “to reform the Church explicitly in order to bring about reunion among Christians.”³⁰

As with most things about the council, such an interpretation remains contested. Giuseppe Alberigo in *The History of Vatican II* separates John XXIII’s speech from its context of working for the visible unity of the church; instead he reads the speech in terms of theological methodology per se. Alberigo reads Pope John’s call to *aggiornamento*, the updating of the faith, as a means of translating doctrine into language that would influence persons formed by the modern institutions of the liberal or Marxist nation-states. He focuses his interpretation

28. John XXIII, “Opening Speech for Council of Vatican II,” October 11, 1962, available at *Our Lady’s Warriors*, <http://www.ourladywarriors.org/teach/v2open.htm>.

29. As Jerome-Michael Vereb writes, “Through the struggles of the Nazi debut, the Second World War, and the Cold War, the idea of ecumenism took on a sense of practical urgency, which gave it impetus and brought it from seed to shoot” (*Because He Was German*, 57).

30. Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, 37. Kerr repeats his interpretation later as well: “Everyone was amazed, and many dismayed, when the elderly, ‘transitional’ Pope John XXIII announced his decision, on 25 January 1959, to hold a Council, foreseeing an agenda which would renew the life of the Church, bringing its teaching, discipline and organization up to date (*aggiornamento*) in order explicitly to facilitate the reunion of all Christians” (*ibid.*, 151).

on John XXIII's statement: "The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another. And it is the latter that must be taken into great consideration with patience if necessary, everything being measured in the forms and proportions of a magisterium which is predominantly pastoral in character."³¹ According to Alberigo, "This was an important methodological guideline, since it situated the work of the council fathers at the heart of the Christian message, while at the same time urging them to present this message to the world in an updated way."³² In this interpretation, the methodological "spirit" of the council moved the Roman Catholic Church into the social, intellectual, and political categories of the modern world.

The "kernel-and-husk" analogy used by John XXIII opened the door to different interpretations of the council. It led particularly to the conflict on whether to interpret Vatican II according to its documents or its "spirit." In the short time from John XXIII's calling of the council to its final adjournment and promulgation, deep cultural and institutional shifts had occurred. The prominent philosopher Charles Taylor calls this shift a movement from "The Culture of Mobilization" to "The Culture of Authenticity."³³ This shift effectively ended the cultural dynamics that had moved the church toward a concern for its visible unity. Instead, concerns to translate the historic

31. John XXIII, "Opening Speech."

32. Giuseppe Alberigo, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 2, *The Formation of the Council's Identity: First Period and Intersession* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 17. John W. O'Malley follows this methodological interpretation of John XXIII's speech:

In its understated way the address was in fact remarkable. It said that the council should take a positive approach; it should look forward; it should not be afraid to make changes in the church wherever appropriate; it should not feel constrained to stay within the old methods and forms, as if hermetically sealed off from modern thought; it should look to human unity, which suggested an approach that emphasized commonalities rather than differences; it should encourage cooperation with others; it should see its task as pastoral. The speech also suggested, or could be understood to suggest, that the council take a large view of its task, not limiting its purview simply to members of the Catholic Church. (*What Happened at Vatican II* [Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2008], 96)

33. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 423–504.

faith into new, more “relevant” expressions for “modern” humans came to predominate. “Plurality of expressions” rather than “unity of faith” became the rallying cry of theologians and churches alike—the celebration of diversity over visible harmony.

In Henri de Lubac’s terms, the cultural task became to naturalize the supernatural. Theologians, having lost the institutionally imposed, hermetically sealed “transcendental realm of revelation” as a counterweight to the immanent frame of history and nature in neo-Thomism, began to think of God in light of the immanence of nature and history. The *nouvelle théologie*’s argument that we must understand nature and history in light of the mystery of God came to be seen as a conservative, authoritarian reaction to impulses for theological expressions of human authenticity within history. The impulse to find the beginning and end of all things in God had empowered the postwar quest for the visible unity of the church; the church, as all things, is raised up and perfected in its harmonious end in the Triune God. From the perspective of the *nouvelle théologie*, an invisible unity of the church that was manifested in an expressive pluralism of human experiences contradicted their deepest convictions.

We can easily underestimate how deeply a concern for a visible unity of the church dominated Christian theological discourse following the “Great Wars” of the twentieth century. We are now quick to remember that Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth called the doctrine of the analogy of being (which he attributed to Roman Catholicism) “the invention of the anti-christ” in the preface to volume 1 of *Church Dogmatics*; but we fail to remember that he completed the sentence: “because of it it is impossible ever to become a Roman Catholic, *all other reasons for not doing so being to my mind short-sighted and trivial.*”³⁴

34. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1 (1928; London: T&T Clark, 2004), xiii (emphasis added). One wonders about the implications of this quote for reading Barth if, as recent research has suggested, he was mistaken in his reading of Roman Catholic thought precisely at this point.

This loss of awareness of the church catholic as the setting for theological discourse happened in the tumultuous decade of the 1960s. The social turmoil manifested deep cultural shifts during the decade. The cultural and institutional landscape for Western theological discourse changed as well, with a more civil and latent, but still visible, turmoil that continues today. Lindbeck, Burrell, and Hauerwas all resisted the new landscape for pursuing their craft, even as the majority of theologians and the church assimilated to the new intellectual and institutional backdrop of theological discourse.

In his recent book *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor describes this 1960s “cultural revolution” as “an individuating revolution.” The new cultural framework emphasized “expressive individualism,” a form of life that finds its historical origins in late eighteenth-century Romanticism. He writes, “Intellectual and artistic elites have been searching for the authentic way of living or expressing themselves through the nineteenth century. What is new is that this kind of self-orientation seems to have become a mass phenomenon.”³⁵ Social scientists have recognized the shift in the behavior, purpose, and language of those who gather in churches, a shift that occurred as a result of the 1960s.³⁶ We have sometimes failed to appreciate how this same cultural shift also altered professional theological discourse.

The Western emphasis on authenticity as a virtue finds its roots in the thought of the eighteenth-century Frenchman Jean-Jacques Rousseau.³⁷ Authenticity developed as a virtue as the elite class attempted to respond to the deistic view of a cold, mechanical universe. Thinkers saw humanity as cut off from the inner force of nature. They argued that humans participate by nature in a dimension that exceeds the mechanism of Newtonian physics through an inner experience of

35. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 473.

36. See, for instance, the work of Robert Wuthnow, especially *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

37. For an excellent discussion of Rousseau and the virtue of authenticity, see Jennifer A. Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 283–305.

the human self. As Charles Taylor again states, “It is an inner impulse or conviction which tells us of the importance of our own natural fulfillment and of solidarity with our fellow creatures in theirs.”³⁸

Within this framework, God “is to be interpreted in terms of what we see striving in nature and finding voice within ourselves”³⁹—the naturalizing of the supernatural. Individuals must “make manifest” their inner experience through outward expressions. External authorities must submit to the deeper authority of internal individual/communal expressions of universal nature. Life becomes full only when we “find” this experience within ourselves and fully manifest it through our own particular exterior expressions. “The notion of inner depths is therefore intrinsically linked to our understanding of ourselves as expressive, as articulating an inner source.”⁴⁰

This, of course, describes the intellectual and social roots of the rise of Protestant liberal theology among the European elite classes in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Gary Dorrien argues that in the United States, the basic tenet of the Protestant liberal tradition is that “theology should be based on reason and critically interpreted religious experience, not external authority.”⁴¹ Friedrich Schleiermacher had developed his expressivist romanticism to address the “cultural despisers” of religion in late eighteenth-century Germany. The Western cultural framework turned authenticity into a mass phenomenon in the 1960s. The cultural shift therefore provided for a rebirth and expansion of the Protestant liberal theological tradition to include even Roman Catholics.

In the early twentieth century, North American liberal Protestants had built an institutional home within elite seminaries and ecclesial educational institutions that, despite appearances

38. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 369–70.

39. *Ibid.*, 371.

40. *Ibid.*, 390.

41. Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, vol. 3, *Crisis, Irony, and Postmodernity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 1.

to the contrary, had never been replaced. Inherent liberal commitments always lay within the so-called neo-orthodoxy of mid-century North America.⁴² After the 1960s Protestant liberals reemerged to anchor theological discourse again in critically assessed human experience or in the political struggle of various oppressed, impoverished, or “marginalized” groups.⁴³

The explicit reemergence of liberal theology and the emergence of political theologies undercut the advances in ecumenicity that the World Council of Churches had experienced from the end of the “War to End All Wars” through Vatican II. Theological discourse fragmented as theologians expressed and defined the nature of authentic experiences of God. Churches followed, with various constituencies updating the church’s language to express authentic transcendental experiences of long-suppressed demographic/interest groups or to fit new ontological systems, such as process metaphysics. Accepting “pluralism” within traditions became the order of the day, whereas moving across traditions to discover suppressed commonalities of faith and order violated the imagination of a culture of authenticity. Ecumenicity returned to the early twentieth-century mantra “doctrine divides; service unites,” which was now expressed in liberationist terms. By 1991, the World Council of Churches adopted an official doctrinal stance

42. Dorrien writes,

My reading also accentuates the common liberal commitments of Niebuhr, Bennett, and Tillich, even as it describes their powerful critiques of liberal idealism and rationalism and emphasizes the key differences between Niebuhr and Tillich. In their positions on authority, method, and various doctrines, and in the spirit of their thinking, Niebuhr, Bennett, and Tillich belonged to the liberal tradition even as they insisted that liberal theology was wrong to sacralize idealism, wrong to regard reason as inherently redemptive, and wrong to suppose that good religion must extinguish its mythical impulses. (Dorrien, *Making of American Liberal Theology*, vol. 2, *Idealism, Realism, and Modernity 1900–1950* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003], 9–10)

43. See Dorrien, *Making of American Liberal Theology*, vol. 3. In evangelicalism, the 1960s and early 1970s witnessed the development of the church growth movement, which employed the same “kernel-and-husk” analogy as used in Protestant liberalism and in John XXIII’s opening speech of Vatican II. For the Protestant liberal roots of the church growth theology, see David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a Land of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), esp. 68–87.

to embrace “pluralism” in its effort to work for an invisible unity of the church.⁴⁴

After a century of movement toward visible reconciliation in the church, the beginning of the twenty-first century witnessed a renewed fragmentation even *within* traditional ecclesial communions. Different ethics and politics within common historical traditions generated polemics that eerily reached the stridency of sixteenth-century Protestant/Catholic discourses. One group’s authenticity represented another group’s moral failure and vice versa. Authenticity in theological language was assumed to be a good, and any thought that might contest authenticity was liable to misunderstanding and resistance.⁴⁵ In such a situation, the visible unity of the church (which ought to be grounded in a common apostolic faith, practice, and order) becomes at best a secondary concern and at worst, a hegemonic, totalitarian imposition that threatens the pluralism that authenticity demands. The concern for the visible catholicity of the church that led to and was embraced by Vatican II becomes not merely wrongheaded, but unintelligible.

Lindbeck, Burrell, and Hauerwas all expressly reject authenticity as a key virtue within theology, both in individualist and communal forms. They work within the authority of tradition of the “Great Church” to attempt to overcome the tragic fragmentation of the church. Their projects are not reactionary ones that reject any good in the culture of authenticity, however. Rather they continue, each in their own way, the deeper program of the theological and pastoral renewal of the church by working for the visible unity of the church catholic. They work within the tradition of the *nouvelle théologie* in which creation finds its beginning, sustenance, and end in God and thus, in which the

44. For analyses of the recent history of the World Council of Churches, see Michael Kinnamon, *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How It Has Been Impoverished by Its Friends* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003); and Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *In One Body through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

45. As Jennifer Herdt has astutely observed, “When authenticity is prized, imitating an external model can be seen as falsifying oneself” (*Putting on Virtue*, 6).

theological task is to describe how all things find their end in God. In this eschatological hope, witnessed to in Christ, they continue the concomitant ecumenical commitment to working toward a visible unity of the church. Their theological work presupposes the embodied context of the church so that the church's visible unity might witness to the eternal peaceableness of the Triune God. They seek to salvage the integrity of the witness of the church despite its failures. The task is undertaken not for the church's own enclosed identity, but for the sake of a world torn apart by various incommensurable expressions of human authenticity that can be resolved only by violence.⁴⁶

To do so, however, meant that Lindbeck, Burrell, and Hauerwas not only had to move against underlying cultural dynamics; they also had to face the institutionalizing of the shift to the "culture of authenticity" in the movement of graduate theological formation from church-based institutions to state-sponsored ones. The tectonic plates of history, culture, and institutions had empowered a movement toward the visible unity of the church in the years leading up to the 1960s. The plates now provided considerable resistance for the continuation and advancement of such a program.

"Purely Secular Ends": The Supreme Court and the Institutionalization of "Religious Studies"

Corresponding institutional shifts in North America supported the movement toward a "culture of authenticity" and

46. We can see the relationship between the ecclesiology of the postliberals and Vatican II in George Lindbeck's analysis of the relationship between church and mission arising out of the council. Lindbeck writes,

"Church and mission" is handled as a single topic because, according to one strong strain of thought at the Council, "church *is* mission." This means that its essence is to be a sacramental sign or witness to God's saving work in all that it is and does. It exercises this witness or missionary function in its *diakonia* or secular service of the world . . . , its *leitourgia* or worship of God . . . , and its *koinonia* or communal unity expressed both interpersonally and in institutional structures . . . and in common faith and dogma. (George Lindbeck, *The Future of Roman Catholic Theology: Vatican II—Catalyst for Change* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969], 5)