

## The Trajectory of Twentieth-Century Catholic Thought

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**T**he first part of the twentieth century exhibited one of the greatest outbursts of creative Catholic thought in the history of Christianity. Further, this was a time of a genuine high culture in the history of the Catholic intellectual tradition. It was a kairotic time, a milestone and crossroad moment. It was the best of times and the worst of times. This time of creative energy presented a supreme challenge to Catholic self-understanding and identity as to how Catholic thought was to engage or not engage the historically unique and monumental event of philosophical modernity and the Enlightenment post-Christian counternarrative. All of this came to a head in the modernist crisis. Przywara's and Stein's thinking sought to meet this challenge head on.

The meeting of this call is what brought them together and was the necessary first step if Catholic thought was to survive this Goliath-like encounter. However, their respective answers are also what set them apart. Indeed, it is not too much to say that their respective strategies and answers to the question of philosophical modernity, at this time of crossroads, are microcosms of the two primary strategies taken within twentieth-century Catholic thought, in the post-Conciliar period, towards philosophical modernity.

This is to say, broadly speaking, an anthropocentric strategy/direction and a theocentric strategy/direction. Within this crossroad moment, it must be once again accentuated that Przywara and Stein were of one mind that the narrow-minded parameters and defensive position of much of neo-Thomism needed to be overcome. A creative strategy of dynamic and creative encounter with philosophical modernity was needed if Catholic thought was not to moan its own dirge.

In this, Przywara and Stein are aligned with the creative maneuver of “transposition” enacted by a host of Catholic thinkers pre-Vatican II in their attempt to overcome “Paleo-Thomism”: from the early Scheler, Guardini, von Hildebrand, Adams, Rahner, and Balthasar for German speakers; to Blondel, Roussetot, Marcel, Gilson, de Lubac, and the *ressourcement* thinkers in France; to Belgian thinkers such as Maréchal, Schillebeeckx, and Emile Mersch. (This list of philosophers and theologians is of course by no means exhaustive.) All were of one mind that Catholic philosophy and theology must be rejuvenated and that the deadlock between modernism/integralism must be broken along with the tradition of Baroque Scholasticism in order for Catholic thought to both survive and thrive.

However, once narrow-minded sawdust Thomism was surmounted through a vindication of many of the thinkers suspected of modernism or neo-modernism by the *aggiornamento* of Vatican II and its opening to the modern world, new problems and questions immediately emerged. It was soon seen that the devil was found in the details of how exactly Catholic philosophy and theology were to open themselves towards, and respond to, philosophical modernity (and modernity as such).

Moreover, if two of the central questions of the modernist crisis can be said to be (1) how were the Church and its thought to engage philosophical modernity? and (2) how is one to understand the question of nature/grace?, then it must be said that both of these questions co-implicate each other and open up into the question of Catholic self-understanding and the style of engagement chosen. (This implies, of course, the very understanding of the Catholic Church itself.)

As such, these questions did not die away as a historical anomaly of the modernist crisis, but wholly reemerged in the new setting of the post-Conciliar context and are still being asked today. In other words, the questions of Przywara and Stein’s time are also the questions of our post-Conciliar context, albeit in a nonidentical setting.

We are not fully beyond this deep-seated identity crisis of Catholic self-interpretation, vision, and style, which seems to be continually intensifying; nor are we fully beyond the question of the monumental post- or anti-Christian event of philosophical modernity (and modernity as such). In

other words, we are not beyond the question of what style of Christian vision is needed today in this dramatic intensifying hour of Christian history.

For the sake of a need to gain an overview of post-Conciliar Catholic thought, the best way to formulate the differences that surfaced, post-Vatican II, is to look at the *Communio/Concilium* divide. This divide is investigated in order to gain a broad topography and general foothold in post-Vatican II Catholic discourse. The prime purpose of this is not to tell the full story of Catholic thought in the twentieth century, and specifically post-Conciliar Catholic thought, but rather to situate Stein and, especially Przywara, in regard to this story. To do this, then part of this story must be told, a story that if I were telling the whole story would have to be greatly complicated.

Moreover, I am well aware that there are many objections to such a view of the *Communio/Concilium* divide, not the least being that this is a gross oversimplification of the issues haunting post-Conciliar discourse. Nor I am insensitive to this objection. Further, it is not my intention to deepen this divide on ideological motives. But the fact is that this divide is real and there are substantive differences between the two camps that cannot be avoided. In my view, then, the question of this “divide” is a question of the expanse of Christian thought and vision, and thus a question of a distinctively Christian pleromatic vision and style of thinking that would seek to effectively go beyond both sides of this divide. This is another way of saying that, in this divide, pleromatic enfleshed Christian vision has been fractured.

That said, in this going beyond there are, no doubt on my part, greater similarities with *Communio* thinkers, in general, insofar as their view of grace or the supernatural funds a robust Christian vision that more effectively counters the narrative pull of secularity (more will be said on this). Nonetheless, there are certainly profound and essential elements in *Concilium* thinkers that are lacking in *Communio* thinkers, most importantly, a sustained social critique and engagement with political theology, as will be seen. I return to this divide again at the conclusion of my [Reimagining the Analogia Entis](https://www.eerdmans.com/Products/7671/reimagining-the-emanalogia-entisem.aspx) [link:https://www.eerdmans.com/Products/7671/reimagining-the-emanalogia-entisem.aspx], by programmatically suggesting a way to move beyond it with the resources of Przywara’s thinking through what I provisionally termed in the introduction an “analogical-apocalyptic metaphysics.”

In the following I will hint at strengths and weaknesses to both approaches, tipping the scale, in the end, towards *Communio* thinkers. Nevertheless, *Communio*-minded thinkers require supplementation in order for a dramatic pleromatic enfleshed vision to be realized. Thus, as a whole, this divide must be gone beyond in order to regain an integral and whole vision of Catholic thought and life.

What then are the facets of this divide? *Concilium* was a theological journal founded in 1965 by Karl Rahner, Johannes Baptist Metz, Anton van den Boogaard, Paul Brand, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Edward Schillebeeckx, Yves Congar, and Hans Küng. This journal was/is intent on propagating the *aggiornamento* spirit of Vatican II. *Communio*, on the other hand, was founded in 1972 by Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri de Lubac, Joseph Ratzinger, and Louis Bouyer (Marion and Claude Bruaire being founding members of the French branch with the aid of Balthasar).

Communio, one might say, stresses more the continuity of Vatican II with the living glory of the pleromatic Christian tradition (in keeping with Ratzinger's both famed and infamous "hermeneutic of continuity").

As such, six demarcations of this "divide" can be discerned. However, it again needs to be noted that these distinctions are by no means hard-and-fast rules, as it is impossible to deal entirely with the intricacies of this debate here. They rather serve as general guidelines aiming to facilitate a broad topography and trajectory of post-Conciliar Catholic thinking in my partial and limited tale of post-Conciliar thought.

(1) In general, it can be said that Concilium thinkers advance a more naturalized, secular, and kenotic view of grace. This view sees grace as a kenotic dissemination into the world that ends in a depletion (or sometimes a total disappearance) of Christian vision, form, and content. This interpretation, in turn, gives far more autonomy to the secular order and post-Christian secular discourse, because grace has been, paradoxically, secularized and thus belongs to the autonomy of the post-Christian secular sphere already while, on the other hand, Communio thinkers emphasize more the transforming power of grace and the supernatural, marking being and the world with the imprint of grace, thus seeing the whole of reality as ordered to completion by and through grace.

By so doing, they open up a fuller Christian vision filled with distinctive form and content. The world is inherently on its way to, and intrinsically orientated towards, the always already-transformative working power of divine grace. The supernatural is always already working on and forming the transnatural relative state of the natural order in light of the historical transformation wrought by the Incarnation.

Such a view is differently and controversially stated by [Milbank](https://www.milbanktheology.com/articles/authors/john-milbank/) [link:/articles/authors/john-milbank/] in *Theology and Social Theory*, where he is discussing the two primary interpretations of nature/grace that seek to overcome the dualism of the two-tiered version of neo-Thomism. He calls it "a difference that can be crudely indicated and misleadingly summarized by saying that whereas the French version 'supernaturalizes the natural,' the German version 'naturalizes the supernatural.'" Milbank's statement is slightly misleading, but the general thrust is perfectly correct. It is misleading because the German version he is speaking of is really Rahner (as he himself acknowledges). But to see Rahner as representative of the German position is misleading, because there are, of course, Przywara and the Swiss German speaker Balthasar, who are clearly at odds with Rahner's naturalizing of the supernatural. (Milbank would, of course, acknowledge this.)

Thus to state it as a German/French "divide" is, indeed, misleading, as he himself attests. However, Milbank is perfectly correct to discern a general partition in the debate over nature/grace, especially as things began to work themselves out post-Vatican II. And he is also right in discerning that this divide consists in a secularization or "naturalization of the supernatural," on the one hand, and a "supernaturalization of the natural," on the other. Thus it is not inappropriate to apply what Milbank says above to the Communio/Concilium divide, the former falling on the latter side, and the latter falling on the former side of Milbank's statement.

(2) Following from this, it is often said that Communio thinkers are revelationally based, while Concilium thinkers are correlationally based (a term that is most clearly and fully expounded in the work of Tillich). And here I am thinking, in particular, of David Tracy's comment in his forward to *God without Being*, in which he makes this apt distinction. Thus, it can be said that Concilium thinkers are more fundamental and anthropocentrically based, while Communio thinkers place more emphasis on the event of revelation, and thus exhibit a more theocentric basis and direction.

(3) These previous two distinctions have a direct bearing on ecclesiology and the place and function of the Church in the modern world. For is the mission of the Church to entirely spill all of its form and content out into the world, thereby abdicating Christian grammar, vision, and form, as seemingly proposed by Schillebeeckx's "extra mundum nulla salus"?

Or, further, is the Church to empty itself, as in Bonhoeffer's protestant variant of Schillebeeckx's phrase, in a dialectic of secularization (a view that has had more than a little influence in Catholic thought)? Does the Church, and hence the Christian thinker, lose the power to speak from within the gift of Christ's distinctive Name, thus falling subject to anonymity? Does this not happen if the Church is fully equated with the world where "secularization" is viewed as the new "stage in the historical evolution of Christianity," as Schillebeeckx suggests? And, here, does not all Christian form become totally mute and undiscernible?

As [O'Regan](https://www.catholicculture.org/author/cyril-oregan/) [link:/articles/authors/cyril-oregan/] profoundly and provocatively poses the dilemma, in a very Balthasarian and Lubacian vein, "The battle is now more nearly within the church than between the church and the world, although the battle inside the church is the battle between the church viewed as church and the church viewed as world." Communio thinkers, on the whole, favor the former, while Concilium thinkers, on the whole, propose the latter.

Such questions of ecclesiology are central for Catholic thought, and implicate the question of the non-ecclesial or ecclesial nature of philosophy, and, by further implication, the question of the possibility of Christian philosophy bound to a certain historic tradition and community that lives in a creative fidelity and (re-)membering of this living tradition in its nonidentical continuation.

(4) It can be said that Communio thinkers, as a whole, are more concerned with liturgy, while Concilium thinkers and liberation theology place a much-needed emphasis on the question of social justice and political theology. The latter is exemplified in a strong critique of bourgeois Catholicism and the complacency of Christians unwilling to challenge the status quo of the ideological framework of Capital's abstract empire and power. This is by no means to say that Communio thinkers are wrong to emphasize the supreme importance of liturgy, but it is to say that the element of social critique in Communio thinkers is extremely insufficient and underdeveloped.

Milbank is spot on that "liberation theologians" are "right to point out that thinkers like de Lubac and Balthasar do not fully follow through the implications of their integralism, precisely to the degree that they fail to develop a social or a political theology."<sup>7</sup> Moreover, O'Regan expresses a

similar view to Milbank when he acknowledges that Balthasar's treatment of social justice is very underdeveloped as compared to Metz. O'Regan thus fully recognizes the need for the aspect of social justice in Balthasar's apocalyptic theology to be more fully developed.

Yet, for both O'Regan and Milbank, it is not a matter of abandoning the vision and breadth of de Lubac's and Balthasar's Christian vision, but rather of showing how this vision of grace more fully funds a political theology (Christian Socialism for Milbank) and a critique of secularity, than does the Rahnerian "naturalized" vision of grace endorsed by liberation theologians. For O'Regan the above problem is a matter of showing that Balthasar's maximalist eidetic apocalyptic is more capable of funding a socio-political or theo-political critique than Metz's more minimalist eidetic apocalyptic discourse. Moreover, it can be said that a serious confrontation with Marxism, Benjamin, Bloch, and the Frankfurt School is severely lacking in *Communio* thinkers, as opposed to the deep dialogue that Metz and liberation theologians have embarked on with these thinkers.

Radical Orthodoxy thinkers and O'Regan have certainly moved in this direction, but there is still much to be done in order to fund a critique of Liberalism/ Capitalism and the "bio-political" order within a distinctively Christian grammar and vision. Lastly, the great debate between Carl Schmitt and Erik Peterson on the possibility of political theology needs to be attended to by *Communio*-minded thinkers if these issues are to be adequately dealt with. Indeed, I would suggest that Peterson's theo-political vision is the missing component in seeking to establish the apocalyptic and theo-political range of pleromatic enfolded Christian vision and thus a radical Christian martyrological challenge to the apostate economized political order.

(5) Further, it can be generally stated that *Concilium* thinkers have a much more positive view of modern philosophical discourse and the turn to the subject and, thus, the possibility of situating Catholic philosophy and theology within this framework, than do *Communio* thinkers. This is expressly seen in Transcendental Thomism and the post-Kantian seeking for an anthropological foundation of revelation (Rahner's "what is to be explained is the intrinsic possibility of intellectual knowledge as the place for a theological event") within the dynamism of human knowing cognizant of the limits of Kantian critique.

This is also seen in the reliance of Metz and liberation theology on Marxist thought, Bloch, Benjamin, and the Frankfurt School. Metz and liberation theologians thus use the aforesaid thinkers to fully fund their philosophical and theological vocabulary, while, conversely, *Communio* thinkers—though by no means avoiding a dialogue with modern and contemporary thought, especially Balthasar—tend to be rightly suspect of the anthropological base of Transcendental Thomism and the basing of theological discourse within the framework of the turn to the subject. Likewise, the dialogue with Marxist thought, Bloch, Benjamin, and the Frankfurt School enacted by *Concilium* thinkers and liberation theology is viewed suspiciously by *Communio* thinkers (and especially Ratzinger). Thus on the whole it can be said that *Concilium* thinkers exhibit a very positive view of philosophical modernity in its ability to fund Christian discourse, while *Communio* thinkers are more suspicious and tend to look to a resourcing and rereading of the Christian tradition, especially in the thought of patristics and the High Middle Ages.

(6) This brings me to my final point, namely, the stance towards the tradition. On the whole, Communion thinkers think that the way forward is the way back (to draw from Eliot). And that the breadth of the living tradition possesses the power and resources to move Catholic thought into the dramatic future. While, conversely, Conciliar thinkers think that modernity offers the ability and opportunity to bring Catholic thought up-to-date by grounding Catholicism in the move towards the subject and the general secularization enacted through the Enlightenment, Marxism, and modern thought. Catholic thought should thus not be afraid to embrace many of these aspects of modernity in an attempt to reroot Catholic thought within the history of modernity, understood as a history of the event of secularization.

However, if O'Regan is right, as I am convinced he is, that the tradition is “a dynamic field of memory, the Christian tradition—as with any tradition or discourse—is constantly threatened by forgetfulness. In a certain sense forgetfulness is coincident with the Christian tradition itself. There was never a time in which we do not find either a straightforward forgetting of the mystery of Christ, or memories which are themselves sophisticated modes of forgetting the essential.” The question thus becomes: Is the event of modernity complicit in this [forgetting](#) and misremembering of the Christian tradition? The answer given by Przywara, Balthasar, de Lubac, Milbank, Desmond, Hart, and O'Regan is yes—to a great degree—the major discourses that prevail in modernity are complicit in a wide-scale forgetting and misremembering of Christian thought and tradition.

What is needed, for these thinkers, is a countermodern or post-modern Christian vision or grammar. This Christian vision resources the tradition, not as a mausoleum, but as a site of remembrance that remembers differently, in order to think the ever-ancient and ever-new freshness of this living tradition in a pleromatic style, thus meeting head on our post-Christian condition.

In sum, this divide is important for gaining an initial foothold in post-Conciliar Catholic discourse. Yet this divide itself needs to be overcome in a full-blooded Christian vision that would be intimately united with Christian practices and forms of life incarnated in Christian social action and praxis. However, at this point this divide serves the purpose of suggesting and establishing lines of lineage and elective affinities, from a post-Vatican II standpoint.

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### Philip Gonzales

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