

Body, Soul and Spirit. Henri de Lubac's Vision of Tripartite Anthropology

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Abstract: The article discusses “tripartite anthropology” developed by Henri de Lubac, with particular emphasis on the concept of the “spirit”. The analysis carried out herein aims firstly to reconstruct a coherent anthropological vision from the fragments scattered in various works of this classic 20th-century theologian. Secondly, it aims to show that the vision of “tripartite anthropology” is still a valid response to contemporary attempts to reduce human existence to the body and psyche. In this context, particularly important is the paradoxical nature of the “spirit,” as shown in this study, which is understood as the sphere of human openness to transcendence: it represents both the coping and the center of human nature. Bringing to light this dual role of the “spirit-pneuma” within de Lubac's theological anthropology is one of the significant results of the analysis presented in the text.

Keywords: theological anthropology, spirit, Henri de Lubac, supernatural, pneuma

Among the opponents of religion, whose voices were becoming stronger in Western philosophy and culture from the late 18th century onwards, many motivated their efforts with the desire to defend humanness, human nature. Freeing man from the yoke of religious fantasies would finally allow him to be what he has always wanted to be: a man and no one else.

The hope for removing the religious burden from man was sought, *inter alia*, in the progress of empirical science. By providing a purely natural explanation of the phenomenon of religion, it was to rid man of the burden of the supernatural. The razor of scientific reductionism that was originally turned against God began to penetrate deeper and deeper, eventually reaching what was considered the essence of human nature. The discoveries of psychology, neurology or evolutionary biology, treated as the ultimate truth about man, have shaken the faith in human subjectivity, freedom and rationality. The optimistic, humanistic atheism of the 19th century gave way to a bleak awareness of the end of man as the inevitable consequence of the death of God. Thus, in the late 1960s, Michel Foucault warned that rejoicing because of the symbolic killing of God is premature; for there was no indication that man who took God's place was to live longer than He.¹

¹ Michel Foucault (*The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 211) states: “They cannot bear (and one cannot but sympathize) to hear someone saying: ‘Discourse is not life: its time is not your time; in it,

Foucault was joined by, among others, Gianni Vattimo who argued that “humanism is in crisis because God is dead.”²

Here is the paradox: As it transpired, man could be man only owing to what was outside the boundaries of pure humanity. What many considered an unnecessary addition, proved to be the foundation. Thinkers with a nihilistic inclination were prompted by this discovery to declare the end of humanity and try to build something upon its ruins. Theologians, on the other hand, have devoted themselves to finding a description of humanity that would secure its irreducible supernatural dimension. Among them was a French Jesuit, Henri de Lubac, who dedicated his most important works to theological anthropology. While writing about the supernatural vocation of man, he referred, *inter alia*, to the biblical idea of “tripartite anthropology” according to which man is not only body (*soma*) and soul (*psyche*) but also includes a mysterious spirit sphere (*pneuma*).

It is the spirit – *pneuma*, as presented in the works of the French theologian – that is the subject of this study. Its main aim is to present a coherent vision that emerges from the fragments about the “spirit” that are scattered throughout the various writings of the author of *Catholicism*, starting with works devoted to theological anthropology, and ending with those on the “spiritual sense of Scripture”; for the latter also shed light on de Lubac’s vision of human nature. Such a reconstruction of “tripartite anthropology” outlined by the Jesuit is intended to reveal its apologetic potential, although this is more about a theological apologia for humanity than an apologia for Christianity in the strict sense. This is because a return to capturing human nature according to the tripartite division into body, soul and spirit makes it possible to avoid the risk of reducing the human interior to the *psyche*, in the modern sense of the word, already at the starting point. The analysis of de Lubac’s “tripartite anthropology” will begin with an introduction to the main thread of his vision of man: the openness of human nature to transcendence, which is the precondition for saving humanity. The second section will analyse biblical and patristic sources of “tripartite anthropology” according to which man, in addition to body and soul, also consists of spirit which cannot be reduced to the aforementioned two components.³ The third section will address the paradoxical nature of the “spirit-*pneuma*” as

you will not be reconciled to death; you may have killed God beneath the weight of all that you have said; but don’t imagine that, with all that you are saying, you will make a man that will live longer than he.”

² Vattimo, *La fine della modernità*, 40.

³ Depending on whether we are dealing with dichotomous or trichotomous anthropologies, the definition of the “soul” will change. In dichotomous anthropologies, the concept includes both psychic and moral as well as spiritual functions, whereas in trichotomous anthropologies its scope is limited to psychic and moral life. However, such clarification does not imply a strict separation of these spheres in man, as will be shown further in this study.

both the apex and center of human nature. The next, fourth, section will outline the links between the idea of the “spirit inside man” and the patristic and medieval methods of “spiritual exegesis” of the Scriptures analysed by the French Jesuit. The fifth and final section will focus on epistemological issues, in particular, the unknowability of the “spirit” by purely rational reflection. The study will culminate in the conclusions presenting a synthesis of “tripartite anthropology” by the French theologian and its potential relevance for the contemporary reflection on man.

1. Anthropology That Presupposes Theology

One of the main difficulties in studying the output of Henri de Lubac is its non-systematic nature. His works often address very different topics, and lots of effort is required to extract the main assumptions connecting them. Nevertheless, most researchers exploring the legacy of the French Jesuit agree with the thesis put forward by Hans Urs von Balthasar, according to whom *Catholicism* — the first book of the theologian from Cambrai, published in 1938 — already contains the stems of all branches of his later thought.⁴ Therefore, it seems appropriate to start the analysis of his theological anthropology with this very work. It provides a good insight into the intention behind the works devoted to human issues published in later years, such as *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (1944), *Surnaturel* (1946) and *Atheism and the Meaning of Man* (1968).

In Chapter XII of *Catholicism*, entitled “Transcendence,” the French theologian first observes that contemporary man has made a titanic effort to subjugate the forces of nature, earning a little bit of free time in return. It was of little avail, however, as “he is no longer able to achieve that fundamental repose that would save him from himself and at the same time enable him to find himself.”⁵ The repose in question is not synonymous with mere relaxation: it is the experience of freedom from historical and social imperatives. In this context, the task of a theologian becomes clear: he is to remind modern man that “man is only himself, he only exists for himself *here and now* if he can discover within himself, in silence, some untouched region, some mysterious background which [...] is not encroached upon by the cares of the present.”⁶ At the bottom of the human soul, there is a “germ of eternity” which already, in the midst of time, “breathes the upper air.” It is precisely the transcendence in man, which also

⁴ Cf. Balthasar – Chantraine, *Le cardinal Henri de Lubac*, 67.

⁵ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 269.

⁶ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 270.

happens to be “the sole warrant of his own immanence.”⁷ In one of his texts, de Lubac describes transcendence as “substantial interiority,” distinguishing it from all the layers of psychological depth man can discover within himself by way of careful introspection.⁸ It does not only involve the movement of transcending what is superficial in man towards what is hidden but also the discovery of “irreducible interiority” which is the seal of God Himself that is imprinted on the human heart at all times.⁹

This idea of *substantial* (and not only psychic) interiority recurs in later works. In a work devoted to a theological theory of cognition, *Sur les chemins de Dieu* (‘On the ways of God’), the theologian argues that the moment the human spirit denies its own mystery, believing that it is transparent to itself, it begins to suffocate.¹⁰ It builds a world for itself which appears to it to be an infernal machine in which there is no room anymore, no free space.¹¹ Meanwhile, to find himself, man must always aim higher and farther than his own self, following an impulse that does not allow him to comprehend and fulfill himself within an enclosed and complete nature.¹² In another text, the theologian concludes that “a well-conducted anthropology presupposes a theology.”¹³ Although this thesis cannot be proven in the strict sense, the failure of the project of humanity without God is a strong argument for its veracity.

What were the specific terms in which de Lubac expressed this anthropology that would include theology as its integral aspect? Without a doubt, the most important is the “natural desire to see God.” The interpretation of this scholastic concept proposed by the later Cardinal became the subject of one of the most famous disputes in 20th-century theology.¹⁴ It is also closely related to the patristic motif of man being created in the image and likeness of God, in which the two expressions are not regarded as synonyms but as two stages in the fulfillment of the supernatural vocation of man.¹⁵ Next to the “desire for God” and “image of God,” a third term appears: “spirit.” The author of *Catholicism* uses it less frequently than the other two and it gains greater importance only in his later writings: it is most fully developed in the extensive text entitled “Anthropologie

7 De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 271.

8 De Lubac, *Affrontements*, 270, own translation.

9 Cf. De Lubac, *Affrontements*, 270, own translation.

10 Cf. De Lubac, *Sur les chemins de Dieu*, 207.

11 Cf. De Lubac, *Sur les chemins de Dieu*, 215.

12 Cf. De Lubac, *Sur les chemins de Dieu*, 226.

13 De Lubac, *Athéisme et sens de l'homme*, 435 own translation.

14 Cf. Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 1–32.

15 De Lubac did not devote any complete study to this topic, although, according to the testimony of one of his students and colleagues, he had already collected the materials, cf. Tilliette, “Le legs du théologien,” 15. A concise synthesis of his *imago Dei* theology can be found, for example, in: De Lubac, *Le Drame de l'humanisme athée*, 7–14.

tripartite” which was not published in full until the early 1990s, in a volume collecting unpublished and scattered studies of the Cardinal.¹⁶ However, as Éric de Moulins-Beaufort demonstrated in his monumental monograph, a retrospective look at the entirety of the works of the French theologian allows one to regard the concept of the “spirit” as one of the keys to his theological anthropology.¹⁷ Taking this conclusion from his research as a starting point, the author of this article will seek to demonstrate not only the importance of the concept of the “spirit” for Henri de Lubac’s thought but also the relevance of his “tripartite anthropology” for the contemporary reflection on man.

2. Sources of de Lubac’s “Tripartite Anthropology”

The most obvious source of the anthropological trichotomy is the passage from the *First Letter to the Thessalonians*, in which St. Paul writes: “And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess 5:23). De Lubac notes that most exegetes have generally tried to diminish the significance of this passage and points to the “happy exception” of the authors of the commentary in the Jerusalem Bible.¹⁸ However, an unprejudiced reader can easily see that for St. Paul man is not only the body and soul but also the spirit. If the soul (*psyche*) defines man in terms of freedom, morality and psychic life, the spirit (*pneuma*) refers to spiritual life *sensu stricto*.¹⁹ Moreover, Pauline anthropology is not about the division of man into three substances or three powers, but about showing “a threefold zone of activity, from the periphery to the center.”²⁰ According to this scheme, the center is the spirit — not only the highest point of human nature but also the principle of unity of his being.²¹

De Lubac acknowledges that there is a certain analogy between St. Paul’s concept and earlier Greek thought. He gives an example of the trichotomy present in Aristotle, where man composed of the body and soul is completed by the mind (*noûs*), the highest and noblest of its powers. This allows him to conclude that

¹⁶ De Lubac, “Anthropologie tripartite.”

¹⁷ Cf. Moulins-Beaufort, *Anthropologie et mystique*, 111; of the same opinion is Michel Sales (cf. “Introduction,” 12), a student and friend of de Lubac, as well as a scholar of his theology.

¹⁸ Cf. De Lubac, “Tripartite Anthropology,” 118.

¹⁹ Cf. De Lubac, “Tripartite Anthropology,” 119.

²⁰ De Lubac, “Tripartite Anthropology,” 117.

²¹ Cf. De Lubac, “Tripartite Anthropology,” 117; the theologian notes that as the principle of unity, the notion of the “spirit” comes closer to the biblical image of the “heart.”

St. Paul was probably familiar with the scheme derived from Aristotle but deliberately transformed it, replacing *noûs* with *pneuma*, and hence the concept of Old Testament origin.²² In this way, Paul introduced certain ambiguity, absent in the Ancients' writings, to the understanding of man. This is because the biblical *pneuma* indicates the presence and action of God's Spirit. Referring the same concept to the internal sphere of man suggests that this concerns a place of the interpenetration of what is human with what comes from God. De Lubac, juxtaposing words from 1 Thess 5:23 with a passage from the First Letter to Corinthians,²³ writes about this duality of St. Paul's vision of man:

This *pneuma* is certainly not the Holy Spirit [...]. Yet it does not appear completely like a constituent part of man as such, like the body or the soul: after having said 'the spirit of man', Paul corrects himself in a way to say: 'the spirit who is in him', which marks a nuance of capital importance. Thus, what par excellence makes a man, what constitutes man in his worth among the beings of this world, much more, what makes him a being superior to the world, would be an element that, rather than being 'of man', would be 'in man'. There is, it seems to us, in this Pauline *pneuma* the same kind of ambiguity, notional because real, as in the divine 'image' or divine 'breath' of creation, such as Christian tradition interprets them.²⁴

As de Lubac shows later in the text, this "strong" interpretation of St. Paul's verse (seeing the "spirit" as the sphere of divine and human interpenetration, and not equating it with some part of the purely natural "soul") was adopted by the Church Fathers and medieval writers.

As for the former, the importance of two is highlighted: St. Irenaeus whose ideas, however, show some ambiguities related to the non-systematic nature of his thought, and Origen who appears to be the main point of reference for the French theologian.²⁵ The author of *Catholicism* focuses primarily on two distinctions introduced by the Alexandrian. Firstly, he notes that *pneuma* for him is, first and foremost, the life of God at its source but, in the second place, it is also the life of God given to man: as he becomes a participant in this life, the man himself becomes the spirit (*pneuma*).²⁶ Secondly, Origen distinguishes

²² Cf. De Lubac, "Tripartite Anthropology," 125.

²³ "Now may the God of peace himself make you completely holy and may your spirit (*πνεῦμα*) and soul (*ψυχή*) and body (*σῶμα*) be kept entirely blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess 5:23 net); "For who among men knows the things of a man except the man's spirit (*πνεῦμα*) within him? So too, no one knows the things of God except the Spirit (*πνεῦμα*) of God" (1 Cor 2:11 net).

²⁴ De Lubac, "Tripartite Anthropology," 129.

²⁵ Cf. De Lubac, "Tripartite Anthropology," 136.

²⁶ Cf. De Lubac, "Tripartite Anthropology," 138.

two types of participation in *pneuma*: the first type is natural participation, related to the bond between man and God at the level of creation; the other type is participation in supernatural life, and only in this case there is a transformative action that results in the *spiritualization* of man.²⁷ De Lubac concludes that although the author of *On the First Principles* sometimes uses the term “spirit” to refer to the moral conscience of man, the main meaning of this term in his works is “the point of contact between a man and the divine *Pneuma* who inhabits him.”²⁸ The spirit in man is proof of “a certain hidden transcendence of the man over himself,” a certain “opening,” and even “a certain received continuity between man and God.”²⁹

After presenting the synthesis of tripartite anthropology in Origen, de Lubac traces the presence of this motif in Latin patristics, especially in St. Augustine.³⁰ He notes that two alternative approaches to tripartite anthropology are derived from the Bishop of Hippo: in one, the human being consists of the body, soul and spirit (*corpus-anima-spiritus*), and in the other – body-reason-mind (*corpus-ratio-mens*).³¹ De Lubac finds echoes of the Augustinian concept in medieval mystics and thinkers (St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the Friends of God, John van Ruysbroeck, St. Thomas Aquinas³²) and in more contemporary authors (among them, he lists philosophers such as Maine de Biran, Joseph de Maistre, Maurice Blondel or Sergej Bulgakov and writers: Paul Claudel and Georges Bernanos). None of them added anything radically new to what has already been said by Irenaeus and Origen. However, in dealing with them, the author of *Catholicism* wants to demonstrate the persistence of a certain anthropological vision, both in Eastern and Western theology. As for its content, he highlights two themes in particular: the liminal nature of the spirit which in man is a place of openness to the superhuman; and the spirit being both the apex and center of human nature. The latter, paradoxical feature merits closer analysis.

3. “Spirit” as the Principle of Unity of a Human Being

Undoubtedly, what first comes into view when exploring the idea of the “spirit” in theological tradition is a certain hierarchy between the three elements that make up a human being. Whether they are listed in Pauline order (from the spirit to

²⁷ Cf. De Lubac, “Tripartite Anthropology,” 138.

²⁸ De Lubac, “Tripartite Anthropology,” 140.

²⁹ De Lubac, “Tripartite Anthropology,” 141.

³⁰ Cf. De Lubac, “Tripartite Anthropology,” 144–149.

³¹ Cf. De Lubac, “Tripartite Anthropology,” 179.

³² Cf. De Lubac, “Tripartite Anthropology,” 150–163, followed by 179–180.

the body) or the reverse order more popular with later authors, the spirit always appears as the supreme element, and therefore the noblest, most excellent, closest to God. However, in addition to expressions identifying the spirit as the “apex of the mind” (*apex mentis*) there are also others that rather equate it with the core of humanity, since the spirit is also “the center of the soul” (*centrum ipsius animae*).³³ Already when analyzing St. Paul’s tripartite anthropology, de Lubac hinted that the Apostle did not refer to a division of man into three layers placed atop each other but into three concentrically arranged spheres, for which the spirit is the center and the principle of unity.³⁴

What does the spatial metaphor of the center add in relation to the apex metaphor? An apex is supported by everything beneath it, but it can only go upwards and this is its only real reference. In contrast, the center is the principle of unity of everything: everything points towards it but thanks to this common orientation, the individual elements can find real unity. It is understandable that the first metaphor is invoked most often when referring to the “spirit” inside of man: man strives upwards; there, above himself, he meets God, while the spirit is that sphere which potentially comes into contact with God (potentially, since a real “contact” may be established only through the gift of grace). However, leaving this metaphor as the only one risks treating the spirit sphere as some most sublime point of human inner life, without any real connection to the other spheres thereof. This is why the French theologian so often emphasizes that the “spirit” is also the *center* of human nature. It is, according to Moulins-Beaufort, an inner impulse that lifts it from within and does not allow it to rest at any of the transitional stages.³⁵ However, for de Lubac this impulse is not merely something added, some kind of elevation above the qualities of pure nature which, albeit beneficial, would also be optional. In the writings of the author of *Catholicism*, there are statements according to which the place where human nature opens to God is also the source of all typically human powers such as reason and will.³⁶ De Lubac calls this the Christian paradox of man: the apex is also the center, the coping proves to be the foundation, and the place where human nature and the gift of grace interpenetrate is both the very core of humanity and the principle of unity of all spheres.³⁷ According to the theologian, “the spirit of man which is in him” is not so much some hidden way out, allowing one to escape from the affairs of this world, beyond morality and the practice of life, towards pure mysticism. On the contrary: it is the source and the principle

³³ De Lubac, *Le mystère*, 137–138.

³⁴ Cf. De Lubac, “Tripartite Anthropology,” 117.

³⁵ Cf. Moulins-Beaufort, *Anthropologie et mystique*, 236.

³⁶ Cf. De Lubac, *Le mystère*, 142.

³⁷ De Lubac outlines his concept of the “Christian paradox of man” in four central chapters of *Le mystère du surnaturel* (135–229).

of unity of all these spheres. In order to illustrate this fundamental role of the “spirit,” he invokes the analogy between the structure of the human soul and the structure of the four senses of Scripture, derived from Origen and later developed in medieval exegesis.

4. Tripartite Anthropology and the Spiritual Sense of Scripture

Henri de Lubac devoted numerous texts to the issue of spiritual exegesis. Among these, it is worth mentioning e.g. Chapter VI of *Catholicism*, entitled “The Interpretation of Scripture,” followed by his study on Origen’s exegetical method (*Histoire et Esprit*, 1950) and, above all, the monumental work on medieval exegesis (*Exégèse médiévale*, 1959–1964³⁸). While these works are testimony to the extraordinary historical erudition of the author, the intention behind them was certainly theological.³⁹ The later Cardinal found a universal mechanism in the scheme of the “four senses of Scripture” which allowed him to link history and spirituality. Some believe that it was a long sought-after alternative to the static, scholastic image of the world which had the additional advantage of being an original Christian creation. Hence, the issue of spiritual exegesis combines different threads, important to the French author.

The scheme of the four senses of Scripture is a certain synthesis, created by the theologian based on his own research on the exegetical methods of ancient and medieval authors, each of whom understood the interpretation of Scripture a little differently.⁴⁰ This synthesis can be summarized as follows: Scripture is the record of God’s acts in history — first in the history of the People of Israel, then in the history of the Son of God and finally the Church, which is an extension of His presence on earth. The testimony of God’s interventions in history is the literal (or historical) sense of Scripture.⁴¹ Apart from this sense, however, there is also a deeper, spiritual sense. It does not replace the historical sense, as was the case, for example, in the late antique exegesis of mythical tales, nor is it some sense arbitrarily added to it.⁴² The spiritual sense is the internal substance of the acts of redemption, which becomes fully visible in the light of the mystery of Christ.⁴³ It is divided into three distinct but closely related senses: allegorical,

³⁸ De Lubac (*L'écriture dans la tradition*) later compiled a kind of synthesis of the most important excerpts from *Histoire et Esprit* and *Exégèse médiévale*.

³⁹ Cf. Hughes, “The ‘Fourfold sense,’” 460.

⁴⁰ Cf. Cf. Hughes, “The ‘Fourfold sense,’” 453.

⁴¹ Cf. De Lubac, *L'écriture dans la tradition*, 115.

⁴² Cf. De Lubac, *L'écriture dans la tradition*, 117–118.

⁴³ Cf. De Lubac, *L'écriture dans la tradition*, 131–132.

i.e. doctrinal; tropological, also known as the moral sense; and anagogical, referring to the eschatological fulfilment of the Christian life.⁴⁴ Since the foretaste of eschatology in this life is a mystical experience, the anagogical sense is also sometimes associated with the mystical sense.⁴⁵

De Lubac is aware that including different exegetical methods in a single scheme is a certain simplification. However, he tries to show that regardless of the exact number of Scripture senses, their nomenclature and their assignment to different spheres of the Christian life, certain characteristics are common to all authors reading Scripture within this tradition. Firstly, what is significant is the relationship between the global spiritual sense and the literal sense: it is an organic unity, although one does not logically follow from the other. It is possible to speak of a certain openness of history/the literal to the spirit, but one that can be actualized only through the crossing of the Spirit — without It, it is impossible to deduce the spiritual sense from the mere literal meaning of the text.⁴⁶ Secondly, what is important is unity between the individual four senses. None of them is surpassed or invalidated by another, although it is clear that it is anagogy that constitutes the ultimate culmination of the whole interpretation process.⁴⁷

Both of these characteristics are points of contact between medieval exegesis and the “spirit anthropology” as seen by Henri de Lubac discussed in this study. First, it is worth noting that for de Lubac extracting the “spiritual sense” from Scripture is closely linked to the activity of this sphere in man which, after St. Paul, he calls the “spirit”: “When the analogy between Scripture and man composed of body, soul, and spirit was introduced, the expression ‘spiritual sense’ was found naturally adapted, as has been seen, to designate the third term of this tripartite division.”⁴⁸

According to de Lubac, the analogy in question is derived from Origen who, incidentally, is at the root of the entire tradition of allegorical exegesis of Scripture.⁴⁹ The great Alexandrian believed that “the Scriptures and the soul have the same structure,” and what in Scripture is called the “spiritual sense,”

⁴⁴ Cf. De Lubac, *L'écriture dans la tradition*, 255.

⁴⁵ About the two types of anagogies, de Lubac (*Medieval Exegesis*, II, 181–182) writes: “Let us say that the first of the two anagogies teaches that part of Christian dogmatics called ‘eschatology’ [...]. As to the second anagogy, it introduces us here and now into the mystic life; at the terminus of its movement, it fulfills that ‘theology’ which is made etymologically the equivalent of ‘theoria’ and which is the contemplation of God. In modern terms, the one is speculative; the other, contemplative” (cf. de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, I.2, 624–625).

⁴⁶ Cf. De Lubac, *L'écriture dans la tradition*, 195.

⁴⁷ Cf. De Lubac, *L'écriture dans la tradition*, 275–276.

⁴⁸ De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, II, 1 (Cf. De Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, I.2, 373).

⁴⁹ Cf. De Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, I.1, 198.

in man corresponds to the “image of God.”⁵⁰ The French theologian’s analysis of the two different versions of the spiritual exegesis scheme present in Origen is a good starting point for explaining the role of spirit-*pneuma* in man. De Lubac refers to these two schemes as “pedagogical” and “spiritual.” In the first, Origen first distinguishes, apart from the literal sense, associated with the “body of the text,” an indirect, psychic sense. Its substance includes moral teachings but they are not yet strictly related to the mystery of Christ. Only then comes the spiritual, Christological sense.⁵¹ The theologian comments that this is a scheme somewhat corresponding to the path of Christian initiation, whereby catechumens sometimes had to first read the Sapiential Books, full of “common-sense” moral maxims.⁵² Meanwhile, the other, genuinely spiritual scheme omits the “psychic” sense understood as something in between the literal and the spirit. This is because morality is integrated into the spiritual sense, just like in man the sphere of moral activity is not separate but inextricably linked with accepting the mystery of Christ.⁵³ The moral sense “develops not just any morality, but Christian anthropology and the spirituality that flows from the dogma.”⁵⁴ De Lubac notes that it was the latter scheme that was taken from Origen by the entire later tradition.⁵⁵

As mentioned above, for the French theologian the scheme of spiritual exegesis is not only a certain old method for interpreting the inspired text but also a sort of operating system which is the basis for the functioning of the entire theological vision of the pre-scholastic Middle Ages. It is therefore not surprising that choosing a specific version of this scheme is also of considerable importance for theological anthropology.⁵⁶ The dominant version, in which the moral sense does not precede the spiritual sense but is integrated into it, allows, in his opinion, to properly present the relationship between morality and mysticism, and

⁵⁰ De Lubac, *Histoire et esprit*, 346.

⁵¹ “Or il suffit de comparer les deux séries de textes, pour voir surgir entre elles une différence extrême. On a d’une part un sens moral qui, venant aussitôt après la lettre ou le «corps» de l’Écriture, correspond à «l’âme» et précède le sens porteur de «l’esprit»; d’autre part, le sens moral qui prolonge et suppose le sens allégorique ou mystique est proprement «spirituel». Différence profonde, parce quelle est structurale. Dans le premier cas, Origène tire du texte sacré diverses «moralités» qui peuvent n’avoir rien de spécifiquement chrétien, avant même d’y lire quelque allusion au Mystère du Christ: c’est là ce qu’on a coutume d’appeler aujourd’hui, d’un mot peu conforme, voire contraire à l’usage ancien, son «alégorisme». Dans le second cas, à partir de la même «histoire», c’est seulement après l’énoncé du Mystère et en rapport avec lui qu’il en vient à l’explication spirituelle” (De Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, I.1, 203).

⁵² Cf. De Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, I.2, 408–410.

⁵³ Cf. De Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, I.2, 415.

⁵⁴ De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, II, 132 (Cf. *Exégèse médiévale*, I.2, 555–556).

⁵⁵ De Lubac (cf. “Tripartite Anthropology,” 178–184) deals mainly with Latin authors; among them an important place is occupied by William of St-Thierry whose *The Golden Epistle* is based precisely on tripartite anthropology, cf. Piazzoni, “Sabbatum delicatum,” 35–37.

⁵⁶ Cf. De Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, I.1, 16–17.

indirectly also between the human soul and spirit.⁵⁷ When writing about this in the already quoted study on “tripartite anthropology,” the author of *Catholicism* emphasizes that “religion, morality and mysticism appear in a reciprocal envelopment.” There is both attraction and tension between them, but certainly not exclusion or conflict. In Catholic spirituality “just as the reasonable life and life according to the spirit penetrate each other, morality impregnates the mystical life to the end.”⁵⁸ Virtues are not only the means of attaining eternal life but also its substance. The theologian refers directly to the language of spiritual exegesis when he writes that anagogy (eschatology, anticipated in mysticism) complements both the allegory (doctrine) and the tropology (morality).⁵⁹ And he concludes that the “Mystical unity with God is wholly impregnated with morality because it is the perfect adherence to Him who is not only the Righteous but, in the most concrete and singular sense, the Good.”⁶⁰

Even at first glance, it is clear that the problem outlined in the quoted excerpts does not correspond exactly to the subject matter of this study. This subject matter is the structure of human *nature*, while in his writings on exegesis, de Lubac points to the unity of the various dimensions of *supernatural* life, such as morality and mysticism. Nevertheless, his comments on the unity of Christian life assume a specific vision of the unity of a human being. If human rational and moral life is closely linked to this intangible dimension of humanity we call the “soul,” and mystical life is related to the activity of the “spirit,” then the emphasis on the unity of the moral and spiritual sense suggests that spirituality, first understood as a certain potentiality, permeates all spheres of human activity, and is not some kind of localized “mystical organ” in man. Here, it is worth noting that the emphasis placed on the interpenetration of the spheres of activity of the “soul” and the “spirit” in de Lubac has yet another source besides his research on medieval exegesis. This source is the philosophy of Maurice Blondel who, in his work *L'Action*, showed that all human activity, including culture, science, morality, philosophy and religion, originates from human openness to transcendence.⁶¹ For him (as for de Lubac), supernatural life is not the addition of some new, supplementary sphere to human activity — besides thinking or acting — but the permeation of all spheres with a new light.

57 Cf. De Lubac, “Tripartite Anthropology,” 187.

58 De Lubac, “Tripartite Anthropology,” 188–189.

59 Cf. De Lubac, “Tripartite Anthropology,” 190.

60 De Lubac, “Tripartite Anthropology,” 193.

61 A summary of the main tenets of Blondel’s philosophy can be found e.g. in: Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 210–220.

5. Spirit and the Depths of the Human Psyche: Incommensurability

Presenting Origenes' exegetical theory in *Histoire et Esprit*, de Lubac concludes that the spiritual sense of Scripture cannot be extracted using purely objective methods. Since it concerns the supernatural mystery, it can be recognized only as a result of spiritual life. It is reached not by purely intellectual inquiry but by putting the Word into practice and internalizing it.⁶² These remarks, applied to exegesis, also fit well with the issue of the "spirit inside man" and its unknowability.

The 20th century was a time of development of various, previously unknown methods for exploring the depths of humanity. Among these, a prominent place belonged to psychology and sociology, whose representatives have often usurped (and still usurp) the right to a comprehensive explanation of human nature. According to their reductionist view, it is impossible to see in man anything beyond his biological substrate, i.e. the body, and the *psyche*, understood as the depths of unconsciousness. At most, it is possible to add to these constituents various social conditions which additionally affect such a corporeal-psyche being. Henri de Lubac strongly opposes such a view. In *Paradoxes of Faith* he writes:

Everything, in the world, is the object of knowledge, actual or potential—everything, except the spirit which builds up that knowledge (and, how many other things there are, too, that go with that invisible, impalpable spirit, that dimensionless point!)—everything, except that operative power forever at work and forever escaping, a shuttle that can never be caught, as it ever moves over to the opposite side to that where science waits to catch it.⁶³

The mystery of the human spirit emerges unscathed from every attempt to reduce it to psychic depth. This is because, as a mystery, it is not so much "unexplored," but "inexplorable." At the same time, it is the subject of awareness and knowledge more direct and more intimate than the best defined subject of science.⁶⁴ Reiterating this idea of the unknowability of the "spirit" in his later work *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*, de Lubac refers to the terminology of different "orders," derived from Blaise Pascal. In a famous passage from *Pensées*, the philosopher indicated that man is not composed of individual layers, different but essentially homogeneous. On the contrary, he consists of different, incommensurable "orders,"⁶⁵ and the methods of cognition applied to one of them remain powerless in relation to other.⁶⁶ Following this thought by the author of *The Provincial Letters*, the French Jesuit writes that we owe a lot

⁶² Cf. De Lubac, *Histoire et esprit*, 391.

⁶³ De Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 60.

⁶⁴ De Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 60.

⁶⁵ In the French original "ordres."

⁶⁶ Pascal, *Pensées*, 86–87 (No. 339–382).

to experimental science, that it opens and will continue to open before us *new* spaces, but they are new “in [their] own order, which is not the only one that exists.”⁶⁷ What does not fall within the order explored by science is precisely the sphere of the spirit:

To take an example with many applications, in man there is a difference between his *psyche*, his *nous* and his *pneuma*. This last designates, in the biblical and Christian tradition, a region very different from the psyche; a region which cannot be explored by the investigations of positive science, but by a spiritual experience which it is arbitrary to neglect as though this were nothing but a dreamworld which disappears in the sunlight of scientific progress. It would be to oversimplify or rather to suppress an enormous problem, if one reduced to one and the same thing the unconscious of the psyche, probed by so-called ‘depth’ psychology, and the profound recesses of the pneuma; in practical terms this would be to deny the latter while ignoring it [...]. It is not psychoanalysis or any other type of ‘psychology’ which we should accuse of narrowness or blindness; but only the kind of ‘positivism’ which barricades the universe of man within what pertains to these disciplines.⁶⁸

How can one cognize the reality of the “spirit” if methods of psychological introspection prove powerless here? De Lubac responds: by looking from the perspective of the purpose for which man was called. According to him, the purely psychological vision of the human soul can be transcended “only through our participation in the Mystery of the Trinitarian life.”⁶⁹ This statement echoes the words of St. Paul that the matters of the spirit become understandable only to those who are of the Spirit.⁷⁰ However, by suggesting that it is impossible to know the “spirit” from a purely natural level, de Lubac indirectly admits that man “in himself,” i.e. viewed solely with respect to what is purely human, would consist solely of the body and soul? By answering this question in the negative, de Lubac is aware that he must face an apparent contradiction. In one of later his works, he will call it the “Christian paradox of man.”⁷¹ The essence of this paradox is the fact that what makes a man a man is precisely this mysterious sphere of openness to God, called the “spirit” but also the “desire for God” or the

⁶⁷ De Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis*, 147. This is what Moulins-Beaufort (*Anthropologie et mystique*, 116) writes about this: “Cette réalité de l’esprit ne peut être perçue que si l’on admet en l’homme différents niveaux de profondeur. L’esprit est la profondeur ultime qui unifie toutes les autres, parce qu’elle est, radicalement, de l’autre ordre. Elle n’est pas chose de l’homme mais, en l’homme, accueil de la Présence du Dieu vivant.”

⁶⁸ De Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis*, 145–146.

⁶⁹ De Lubac, “Tripartite Anthropology,” 199.

⁷⁰ Cf. 1 Cor 2:14–15.

⁷¹ De Lubac, *Le mystère*, 135.

“idea of God in man.”⁷² It is not grace and, at the same time, cannot be captured as part of the purely natural vision of man. In other words, for the French theologian, there can be no question of human nature that is pure, self-sufficient, and closed within clear boundaries — one to which grace would be attached like an extra floor to an already completed building. On the contrary, consistently accepting the truth about the creation of man in the image and likeness of God excludes the possibility of such a clearly defined nature. Indeed, man becomes fully himself only when, through communion with God, he is elevated above the level of what is purely natural. Until this actually happens, he remains a mystery to himself; he carries some kind of wound that demands filling, yet from its shape, it is impossible to deduce what the filling would have to be. It is a “suspended middle” located between the purely natural and the supernatural toward which, without possessing it, it does gravitate.

In the language of “tripartite anthropology,” it is a yet-to-be-realized opening to God — a mysterious wound that makes a man a question without an answer — it corresponds to the concept of the “spirit” in the sense of a certain sphere in the structure of a human being. This sphere can be clearly recognized and fully realized only when it is filled with the presence of God’s Spirit. Only from the Spirit’s level of activity does it appear in all its truth. Therefore, it is impossible to remove the ambiguity of the concept of “the spirit of man which is in him,” just as it is impossible to remove (within theology) the ambiguity of the concept of “nature” by separating the purely natural and the supernatural.

By highlighting the unknowability of the spirit sphere in man, Henri de Lubac wishes to defend Christian anthropology against various kinds of reductionism. His ultimate goal, however, is to defend humanity in general because, as shown in the first section of this study, only by securing an openness to transcendence in human nature is it possible to save man from himself. The author of *Catholicism*, unlike many 20th and 21st-century theologians, does not take as a starting point any of the then popular philosophical, psychological or empirical anthropologies, which would only secondarily gain a theological complement.⁷³ In his view, theology is the only science capable of framing the discourse about man broadly enough to capture the whole truth about him. While this claim of theology that it can possess the only complete image of humanity may nowadays seem all too daring, it paradoxically is supported, apart from the certainty that comes from faith, by today’s prophets of “the end of man.” Humanity, put on a pedestal by secular humanism, without a foundation in God appears

⁷² For the significance of these three concepts in de Lubac’s theology, cf. e.g. Moulins-Beaufort, *Anthropologie et mystique*, 491.

⁷³ This is an accusation directed against, among others, Karl Rahner, cf. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 207–209.

to crumble like a house of cards. In a sense, contemporary debates on humanity are a testament to the accuracy of Gilbert K. Chesterton's predictions that with the progress of western thought more and more truths regarded as rational certainties will be negated and become "a matter of faith."⁷⁴

Conclusions

Henri de Lubac was a theologian who devoted much more space in his works to theological reflection on the man than to any of the dogmas of faith. This was due to his conviction that the crisis of faith and progressing secularization he observed were not so much the result of a rational negation of the credibility of Christianity but of a certain, increasingly dominant, vision of humanity in which there was no more room for any opening towards Transcendence. Therefore, behind the anthropology developed by de Lubac, there was a doubly apologetic intention. In the first place, he was concerned with defending the Christian faith, and he did so by critiquing reductionist anthropologies and identifying tripartite anthropology as the only one that does full justice to the mystery of human nature. However, the theologian was also aware that in defending this vision of humanity, he in fact defends man himself. For only by maintaining a certain opening that goes beyond the boundaries of the visible world could he remain a free, rational being endowed with an inalienable dignity. Among the means of defending man against reductionism were de Lubac's references to the biblical and patristic idea of "tripartite anthropology," according to which man is composed not only of the body and soul but also of the spirit. The latter constitutes the very sphere of openness to Transcendence. References to the "spirit" in the work of the French Jesuit are an excellent example of creatively using old concepts to tackle contemporary challenges. Instead of the body-soul dichotomy which, in the age of development of sciences dealing with the human interior, can easily be reduced to the body and the psyche, he proposes a return to St. Paul's trichotomy, in which the sphere of contact with God is from the outset distinguished from the one responsible for psychic or intellectual functions. What is important, de Lubac strongly emphasizes the fact that the "spirit" is not merely a beautiful coping without which the building of humanity could nevertheless stand. On the contrary — it shows that this highest point in man, the place of his contact with God, is also the center of human nature. One of the thoughts that recur throughout his entire oeuvre devoted to anthropology is that even such fundamental human powers as reason and will are linked to his openness to

⁷⁴ Chesterton, *Heretics*, 305.

Transcendence. De Lubac is interested not so much in proving this claim based on philosophy but in demonstrating that we are dealing here with a science firmly rooted in the theological tradition of the Church. This is done through, inter alia, references to spiritual exegesis and the schema of “four senses” present in former authors. Highlighting the link between this subject matter and the anthropology of the “spirit” is a rarely addressed, but important theme in the work of the author of *Histoire et esprit*.

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