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Soldiers of God in a Secular World; Catholic Theology and Twentieth Century French Politics by Sarah Shortall, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA, London, England, 2021, pp.338.

In this book, Notre Dame historian Sarah Shortall retells the story of the French Catholic theologians whose innovative work has gone down in history as *nouvelle théologie*. This is a path well-trodden, but the originality of Shortall's work is that she looks at it from the perspective of political thought rather than from the more traditional angles of church history or the history of theology. Her intention is to 'integrate theology into the intellectual history of modern Europe' (11), and she does this very successfully in this outstanding book. The point she makes is that although the *nouvelle théologie* theologians professed to do theology rather than politics, their theology had 'political stakes' (12), something often overlooked by church historians and intellectual historians alike. Proper analysis of this reveals the political pertinence of religion, and hints at that of many other seemingly apolitical things, including art, aesthetics and the body (253).

Shortall's account begins with the exile of two French houses of study, the Jesuit Maison Saint-Louis in Jersey (1880-1941) and the Dominican Le Saulchoir in Belgium (1904-1939). They were victims of the culture war between the combative, antimodern Catholicism of the time and the anticlerical French Third Republic, which expelled them from the fatherland. Their experience of exile proved surprisingly fecund, as Jersey and Le Saulchoir went on to produce many leading lights of twentieth-century French theology. The main protagonists of Shortall's story are the Jesuits Henri de Lubac, Gaston Fessard, Yves de Montcheuil and Jean Daniélou and the Dominicans Marie-Dominique Chenu and Yves Congar. These men accepted the demise of the confessional state and instead proposed theologies that opened up avenues to Catholic engagement in public life in the secular state. In

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doing so, they rejected the neo-Scholasticism of their elders, which had once been introduced as a Catholic antidote to modern liberalism but was in fact its mirror image, and was wholly incapable of transcending the sterile stand-off with its secular nemesis.

By the time these ideas began to take shape, it was no longer the liberalism of the long nineteenth century that they had to contend with, but the totalitarianisms of the twentieth. The first two parts of Shortall's book deal with the *nouvelle théologie* men and their theological responses to communism, fascism and Nazism; responses that were also consistently critical of liberal democracy, which they saw as the cause of, not the solution to, the rise of totalitarianism. Their endeavours received a fillip in 1926 when Pope Pius XI condemned Charles Maurras's *Action française*, breaking its reactionary stranglehold over French Catholic politics. The denunciation also discredited the type of neo-Scholasticism with which this movement was allied, and inspired a search for alternatives to the ideologies that would not sully Catholicism through compromise with them. The result was personalism, which purported to avoid the 'excesses of liberal individualism and totalitarian collectivism' (51). Shortall outlines the *nouvelle théologie*'s specific version of personalism: 'mystical body of Christ' ecclesiology, which 'offered a competing model of collective unity' (52), one in which the human person would flourish rather than be crushed. She persuasively presents this as an example of the political significance of an ostensibly purely theological concept. It served as the 'official theology' (78) of Catholic Action.

Shortall shows that two distinct tendencies were in evidence among the *nouvelle théologie* protagonists that manifested themselves at different times with starkly contrasting political consequences. The first, Dominican and Thomist, retained the distinction between nature and supernature and on that basis accorded autonomy to the natural sphere, where Catholics could work together with non-Catholics to pursue the common good. The underlying logic was that of the incarnation: as Christ had become man to save humankind, so Christians must be present in the world to build up the mystical body of Christ. This logic was used by Catholics as an argument to

participate in *Action française* (which was led by an atheist), to support the Vichy regime's morally inflected 'national revolution' during the Second World War, and later, in the post-war years, to justify cooperation with communists. Shortall sees the very versatility of this concept, which served to facilitate both right-wing and left-wing alliances, as proof that Catholic responses 'transcended the logic of right and left' (94).

The second, Jesuit and patristic in inspiration, was sceptical, precisely because 'incarnatory' presence meant keeping undesirable company. It looked instead to eschatology as its theological principle and rejected the notion of separate spheres. It posited that the church was universal: because salvation encompasses everything, nothing is foreign to the church. In practice, this meant that Catholics needed to keep their distance from all political ideologies, criticising them not in political terms but 'obliquely' (8), using theological language. Shortall helpfully calls this 'counter-politics' (8) and sees the 'spiritual resistance' which de Lubac and others put up against Vichy and Nazism, particularly in their clandestine journal *Témoignage chrétien*, as a prime example.

The third part of the book addresses the post-war years. Shortall discusses how the two distinct tendencies affected the positions *nouvelle théologie* theologians took with respect to the great issues of that era. The Thomists attempted to associate Catholicism with the human rights discourse of post-war humanism by emphasising natural law (rather than liberal individual rights), while the Jesuit *ressourcement* theologians founded the dignity of human beings on the universal call to incorporation into the body of Christ, and sought to promote a Christian existentialism that corrected Sartre's atheist 'distortions'. The Thomists favoured cooperation with the left and incarnatory presence in the world, for instance in the famed worker-priest movement, while the Jesuits redeployed the counter-politics they had recently directed at Vichy, but this time against communism, in a 'logic of refusal' (182).

The last chapter charts the Vatican's crackdown on the *nouvelle théologie* in the 1950s and the movement's astounding comeback during the Second Vatican Council. The differences between the two strands can also help to explain the fissures that emerged between them, over how positive or negative the council's language about modernity should be, and, later, over 'the logic of incarnation' versus the 'demands of eschatology' (243). The bone of contention was perhaps not the attitude to modernity as such, as Shortall appears to suggest; one of the Thomist 'progressives', Edward Schillebeeckx, can be found after the council deploring its 'liberal' optimism about modernity and its lack of social criticism. In the epilogue, Shortall points out how *nouvelle théologie* has influenced a surprisingly wide array of intellectual movements, ranging from liberation theology and radical orthodoxy to post-secular Foucauldian critiques of modern liberalism.

Shortall has impressive mastery of her subject, of Western intellectual life in general and of French history, she writes elegantly and with great precision, and has an admirably clear grasp of the political implications of the theological stances she describes. All this combines to make this book an illuminating account of the main intellectual sweep of twentieth-century Catholicism, which she restores to its rightful place in the history of European thought.