

## The Post-Traditional Ontology and Hermeneutics of Congar's Theology of History

Paul Clarke OP 

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### Abstract

Yves Congar's impressive theology of tradition is, rather paradoxically, a post-traditional attempt to rediscover, conceptualize, and account for tradition. A critical element of Congar's post-traditional work on tradition is his retrieval of a 'Thomistic' theology of history. This article explores the ontology and hermeneutics of Congar's theology of history, focusing in particular on some of the dynamics and internal tensions of Congar's mediation of Thomistic *sacra doctrina* to distinctively modern theological questions. I first discuss Congar's hermeneutics of reception, with particular attention to the influence of Marie-Dominique Chenu. Second, I sketch the main features of Congar's theology of history, with particular attention paid to how it is informed by his *ressourcement* reading of Thomas. By way of conclusion, I offer an appraisal of and critical response to Congar's post-traditional hermeneutics and ontology of history

### Keywords

theology of history, *ressourcement*, Congar, tradition, post-traditional, development of doctrine, Thomas Aquinas, hermeneutics

In the discussions of the theological problem of doctrinal development in the twentieth century, one of the most compelling and fruitful contributions was Yves Congar's theology of tradition.<sup>1</sup> In keeping with the hermeneutical program of the so-called *ressourcement* movement, Congar responded to a distinctively modern question by drawing on the resources of critical historiography and the patristic-medieval theological patrimony in order to formulate a synthetic theologico-historical account for the living *traditio* of Christian doctrine. Attentive to the

<sup>1</sup> Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay* (New York: Macmillan, 1967). The original French texts appeared earlier: *La tradition et les traditions: essai historique* (Paris: A. Fayard, 1960); *La tradition et les traditions: essai théologique* (Paris: A. Fayard, 1963).

signs of the times as well as the riches of the Christian intellectual and spiritual tradition, Congar felt the urgent need to articulate a theological conception of tradition adequate to the problem raised by modern critical historiography, which threatened to dissolve the unity of Christian tradition into a history of discontinuity culminating in a fragmented, arbitrary assemblage of dogmatic pronouncements.

Recognizing that the problem of the development of doctrine (or tradition) is to a large extent determined by the theology of history it presupposes, Congar often turns to consider this question explicitly, treating the themes of historicity, temporality, providence, and eschatology. In these reflections, he is in close though not exclusive dialogue with Thomas Aquinas.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Congar, like his teacher and mentor, Marie-Dominique Chenu, recognized (in self-conscious opposition to the Thomism of the 'Roman school') that a contextualized retrieval of Thomas was integral to the renewal of theology in the Church, and in the urgent task of mediating between the Church and the world. Congar's theology of tradition is thus bound up with his *ressourcement* program of retrieving a *historically-minded* Thomas in order to formulate a theology of history adequate to addressing the problems and concerns of Congar's own historical moment. The complex interplay between Congar's tasks of mediating past to present, and Church to world generated a correspondingly complex hermeneutics of reception.

This essay offers a study of the ontology and hermeneutics of Congar's theology of history, seeking to illuminate some of the dynamics of Congar's mediation of Thomas's *sacra doctrina* and *sens de l'économie* to distinctively modern theological questions. As I will show, a deep and representative tension in Congar's reception of Thomas—consequently reflected in his constructive theological account of history—can be seen in his shifting assessment of Thomas's explanation of the perfect knowledge of the faith enjoyed by the apostles in the *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 1, a. 7 ad 4. This passage, important to 20<sup>th</sup> century discussions of doctrinal development (particularly among Thomists), drew appreciation from Congar in various publications during the years 1958–1963, until he sharply reversed his judgment in a 1967 essay, citing a dangerous ontologizing of the economy and prefiguration of the rationalism of later scholastic theology.<sup>3</sup> My suggestion is that Congar's theology of tradition is complicated by being 'post-traditional' both in its ontology and hermeneutics of reception of Thomas and in his theological conception of history, with

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Meszaros has drawn attention to Congar's fusion of the influences of John Henry Newman as well as Thomas in *The Prophetic Church: History and Doctrinal Development in John Henry Newman and Yves Congar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Yves Congar, 'Le moment "économique" et le moment "ontologique" dans la *sacra doctrina* (Révélation, Théologie, *Somme Théologique*)', in *Bibliothèque Thomiste XXXVII: Mélanges offerts à M.-D. Chenu, Maître en Théologie* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1967), pp. 180–81.

the somewhat paradoxical result that history is rendered not more, but less intelligible.

I structure the essay in three parts. The first discusses Congar's hermeneutics of reception, with particular attention to the influence of Marie-Dominique Chenu. The second part sketches the main features of Congar's theology of history, with particular attention paid to how it is informed by his reception of Thomas. While Congar nowhere offers a formal theology of history, by collating a number of texts it is possible to assemble the principal elements and gain a sense for their inner logic.<sup>4</sup> I next examine whether and how Congar's comments regarding 'ontological' and 'economic' theology and his shifting view of *ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 7 ad 4 bring to light an inner tension of his reception of Thomas and the theology of history in which this Thomistic *ressourcement* plays a crucial role. By way of conclusion and drawing on Kenneth Schmitz's notion of a 'post-traditional' conception of tradition, I offer a brief appraisal of and response to Congar's hermeneutics and ontology of history.

### A Complex Mediation: Congar's Hermeneutics of Reception of Thomas

Congar's development of a theology of tradition and of history has multiple ends in view. While distinct, these aims are intimately related, and bear upon Congar's alignment within the *ressourcement* movement of the mid-twentieth century. First, he is seeking to give a theological account of the economy of revelation that reinstates history within theology. As such, Congar's theology of tradition is integral to his program of renewing Catholic theology in a richer biblical, patristic-medieval, and contemplative form. Second, convinced of the urgent need to engage the contemporary situation, he is aiming to mediate the Church and the truth of Christian doctrine to the needs and concerns of the modern world. This instinct, typical of the *ressourcement* hermeneutic, thus recovers history not just 'for its own sake', but also in view of particular 'signs of the times'. As Jon Kirwan observes,

[T]he *ressourcement* approach begins with a certain ecclesiastical, social, and political analysis of the 'needs of today'. Once a thorough study of the present milieu is ascertained, there seems to be a process of circularity whereby the present is used to judge the past and the past is used to judge the present—all with the intention of shaping a future theology better suited to their analysis of the present. An attempt is made to look

<sup>4</sup> Conscious of Congar's prodigious output, I am focusing on his work from the years 1958-1974. The principal work, of course, is *Tradition et les traditions* (1960-1963), but also the earlier *La foi et la théologie* (1958). Several critically important essays, both pre- and post-Conciliar, fill out the consideration of Congar's theological sense of history.

into the past in a search for historical forms that might answer present shortcomings, and when historical currents are apprehended, there is no attempt at antiquarian retrieval; they are configured to align with perceived current needs in a theology that is at once novel yet claims to stand on tradition.<sup>5</sup>

For Congar, a synthetic conception of tradition, both historical and theological in character, is of vital ecclesiological importance. More than a historical narrative or apologetic, Congar's work in *Tradition* is a full-scale attempt to address *theologically* the problem raised with the advent of modern historical consciousness. Yet at the base of the theological application to tradition is a hermeneutical judgment and accompanying ontology of history.

Third, and most importantly, Congar's *ressourcement* project is heavily influenced by Chenu's programmatic and often polemical recovery of Thomas's positive vision of temporality and materiality, over against an 'Augustinian' or 'Neoplatonic' dualism, which enabled him to speak of Thomas as having a concept of human historicity.<sup>6</sup> As early as 1924, Chenu had proposed that discussions of the development of doctrine should take into account Thomas's principle, *cognita sunt in cognoscente secundum modum cognoscentis* (Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower).<sup>7</sup> Because human knowing in general is 'earthly, complex, and essentially progressive', we should expect that the knowledge of faith follows the same pattern.<sup>8</sup> Without mitigating the objectivity and immutability of the faith, the intellectual dynamism of the human subject is crucial for grasping the *raison profonde* of doctrinal development. Congar often refers approvingly to these proposals, at times even echoing Chenu's language in his own formulations of Thomas's sense of human historicity.<sup>9</sup> A further and closely related point of influence is Chenu's narrative of the social, ecclesial, and intellectual shifts of the 13<sup>th</sup> century as an analog for Chenu and Congar's own 20<sup>th</sup> century context.<sup>10</sup> In particular,

<sup>5</sup> Jon Kirwan, *An Avant-Garde Theological Generation: The Nouvelle Théologie and the French Crisis of Modernity*, (Oxford: University Press, 2018), pp. 167.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Marie-Dominique Chenu, 'Situation humaine: corporalité et temporalité', in *Théologie de la matière: civilisation technique et spiritualité chrétienne*, Foi vivante 59 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1968), pp. 31–63, in which Chenu argues that Thomas's appropriation of Aristotle underlies his concept of historicity. This essay was first published in 1960. See also his later essay, 'Création et histoire', in *St. Thomas Aquinas, 1274-1974: Commemorative Studies*, vol. 2 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1974), pp. 391–99.

<sup>7</sup> Marie-Dominique Chenu, 'La raison psychologique du développement du dogme d'après Saint Thomas', *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 13, no. 1 (1924): p. 46. See also *ST II-II*, q. 1, a. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Chenu, 'La raison psychologique', p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 256, note 2.

<sup>10</sup> The narrative is at its most strident in Chenu's notorious 1937 lecture, later published as *Une École de théologie: le Saulchoir* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1985). For discussion,

Chenu situates Thomas's philosophical and theological project within the trajectory of Albert the Great's 'intellectual revolution', in which the critical assimilation of Aristotle was the occasion for a recovery of the proper density and value of nature and reality, which was predominantly being viewed in terms of 'complicated symbolisms' used 'exclusively for moral and religious allegory'.<sup>11</sup> Congar, like Chenu, sees in Albert and Thomas an 'awakening critical spirit' that is both an anticipation of modernity and a pattern for a generous and audacious engagement with the contemporary world. The recovered Thomas is not merely an Aristotelian, but, more deeply, he is a theologian of 13<sup>th</sup> century *ressourcement*, whose contemplation of the mysteries of faith and absorption of the patristic tradition informs and motivates his energetic engagement with the wider world, and thus serves as an iconic pattern for the *ressourcement* Thomists.

Congar's reception of Thomas is thus internal to his larger project of developing a theology of tradition. It shows an extraordinary knowledge of Thomas's *oeuvre* and a refined sense of the animating principles of his thought. At the same time, Congar maintains a certain reserve; he is a mediator of Thomas, with a weather-eye turned toward his own century's social, ecclesial, and intellectual *signa temporum*.

### From Below and From Above: Congar's Ontology of Sacred History

Congar aptly expresses the heart of his theology of history in the following declaration in *Tradition*: 'Stone by stone, the City of God is thus built up within world history, from below and from above'.<sup>12</sup> Keen to show how sacred history is 'both divine and human', here and elsewhere he describes this twofold *ordo* by first formulating an account of human historicity. Only once he has shown that man is intrinsically yet non-reductively a historical being does he turn to describe how this historicity is presumed and transformed in the *temps de l'Eglise*.

see Christophe F. Potworowski, *Contemplation and Incarnation: The Theology of Marie-Dominique Chenu* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001); Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 221–35; Meszaros, *The Prophetic Church*, pp. 138–40; Kirwan, *An Avant-Garde Theological Generation*, pp. 157–203.

<sup>11</sup> M. D. Chenu, 'The Revolutionary Intellectualism of St. Albert the Great', *Blackfriars* 19, no. 214 (1938): p. 9. Congar absorbed this thesis from their shared time at Le Saulchoir, and often incorporates it within his own narrative arguments for Thomistic *ressourcement*. See his essay 'L'influence de la société et de l'histoire: sur le développement de l'homme Chrétien', *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 7 (1974): pp. 673–692.

<sup>12</sup> Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 260.

*Human Historicity and Divine Providence*

Theology turns its attention to the question of history, in Congar's view, with a certain urgency. While the theological reflections of previous epochs seem to have left history out of its primary field of vision, this is not an option for Congar and his contemporaries. 'Today', he writes, 'we are more aware of this aspect of *temporality* or historicity. Human discourse, with its successive approaches, appears to us to be spread out in time, wherein the caravan of *viatores* advances'.<sup>13</sup> Inspired by the interpretation of Thomas's concept of historicity as related to his Aristotelian noetic in Chenu's 'La raison psychologique du développement du dogme', Congar argues on the basis of Thomas's use of the axiom that God's providence cares for the human creature according to its historical mode or condition.<sup>14</sup> The mode of knowing in faith is not passive, but involves the same intrinsic dynamism and partiality as in its natural mode:

Saving faith is received by minds which must consider it not merely as something absolute, but as a deposit given once and for all by the apostles, and consequently to be referred to them 'without adding or taking away anything'. But, at the same time, these minds must 'receive' faith in an active way, in a manner which befits their nature. They are human minds, discursive intellects which perceive successively and only partially; hence, also, minds fulfilling themselves only when in contact with other minds; lastly, minds living in a cosmic biological and temporal continuum. Historicity is an essential characteristic of the human mind.<sup>15</sup>

In *La foi et la théologie*, Congar notes that a merely anthropological-epistemological approach will be insufficient on its own, since it needs to be supplemented by the fact that (a) the *donné initial* is the 'measure of all the acquisitions of the spirit' and (b) development proceeds under the Holy Spirit's guidance, assisted by Magisterium. 'But, in the measure to which man is "*recipiens*,"' he notes, 'the *Donné* which is handed to him follows the human "*modus recipientis*".'<sup>16</sup>

Congar shows himself cognizant of two objections facing his retrieval of a historically-sensitive Thomas. For one, it is dangerous to seek answers from past thinkers to questions they never asked. The second is the widespread assumption that Thomas lacked a sense of history or substituted 'a Greek (Aristotelian, Stoic) point of view for the concrete and historical point of view of the Bible'.<sup>17</sup> Congar

<sup>13</sup> Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 105.

<sup>14</sup> See *Summa theologiae* I, q. 75, a. 5 3.

<sup>15</sup> Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 256.

<sup>16</sup> Congar, *La foi et la théologie*, Le mystère chrétien 1 (Tournai: Desclée, 1962), p. 105.

<sup>17</sup> Yves Congar, 'L'historicité de l'homme selon Thomas d'Aquin', *Doctor Communis* 22 (1969): p. 297.

dismisses these objections with a reply that he repeats in various forms elsewhere: 'We certainly do not presume to make the position of St. Thomas coincide with the notion of man's historicity in modern phenomenology'. Instead, Congar purports to show that human nature, for Thomas, 'confirms a real historicity'.<sup>18</sup> In keeping with Chenu's narrative of the 'intellectual revolution', Congar emphasizes the Aristotelian character of Thomas's thought while muting its Neoplatonic elements. Attentive study, Congar claims, shows that 'St. Thomas sought his way less and less in the line of participation and exemplar causality, and more and more in that of finality, of motion and *acts* by which man is moved and freely moves himself toward his end'.<sup>19</sup> This judgment is integral to Congar's argument that Thomas has a robust appreciation for the integrity of nature, time, and the 'horizontal' dimension of human life. Any suggestion of Neoplatonism would only complicate matters. It is striking, however, that Chenu and Congar, reacting against an 'extrinsicism' in Neoscholastic interpretations of Thomas on the relation of the natural and the supernatural, are keen to show the autonomy and integrity of nature.<sup>20</sup> The twist is that they employ the 'Aristotelian' interpretation of Thomas in order to surface a latent historicity in the Common Doctor's anthropology and epistemology.

There are, in Congar's view, two levels at which human historicity is operative. On the first level, Congar observes, 'man lives in time, has need of time, and what he acquires can be dated, is successive, and situated in a framework where it is definable by a before and after'. At a second and more profound level,

Man is not only situated in time and affected by temporality: *he has a history*. Each human being, and humanity as a whole, has a history and neither the angels above us, nor the animals below us in the scale of creation share this feature with us. For to have a history it is necessary to be in time and, at the same time, to go beyond it, to rise above it. Because man transcends time, what he does in time is not only able to survive it (this is assured in animal generation already, in the work of the species), but is recapitulated and permits a certain progress. [...] There is a distinctively human story, men have as such a destiny; this is not true of dogs and apes. History requires a dynamic and autofinalized unity of what is accomplished in time successively, not a mere succession-repetition of it.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Congar, 'L'historicité de l'homme', p. 297. Congar is quite insistent that he is only bringing to the surface what is latent in Thomas. 'Let us repeat: We do not want to make a modern out of St. Thomas, even less a pre-Heideggerian. But we think to have shown that one cannot tax him with fixism, and that there exist in his thought some elements or beginnings of a certain vision of the historicity of man' (p. 304). See also 'L'influence de la société et de l'histoire', p. 688.

<sup>19</sup> Congar, 'L'historicité de l'homme', p. 297.

<sup>20</sup> Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology*, pp. 135–48.

<sup>21</sup> Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, pp. 256–57.

Distinguishing history from mere temporality, Congar argues that transcendence is a necessary ingredient for human historicity. This 'vertical' element is responsible for the possibility of progress and destiny. Strongly asserting the integrity of the natural order, Congar deploys the concept of 'autofinalization'. This expression, favored by Chenu, is elsewhere articulated as man's 'autorealization' or 'autocreation'.<sup>22</sup> Congar argues that 'for St. Thomas, man is *a being who makes himself*, who self-realizes by his acts (under the transcendent—natural and supernatural—motion of God)'.<sup>23</sup> This notion of 'autocreation' or 'autorealization' is not opposed to, but presupposed by the creative and provident knowledge and will of God. Congar writes that since 'men are concretely fashioned by all this and which they fashion in their turn, one should say that God creates them *according to* all these historical, cosmic and social dependencies, and that, for all that, he creates men *by* them [*il les crée par elles*]'.<sup>24</sup> The dynamic autofinalizing tendency of human nature; its situation in and transcendence of time; the discursive character of the human mind; these are the ingredients of Congar's account of human historicity, drawn from Thomas.

In articulating how sacred history is both divine and human, Congar frequently recurs to the language of the 'initiatives of God' and 'the demands of time'. The history of the Church, he declares, is 'the gradual realization of man's covenant relationship with God. This is the succession of men's responses to God and to the demands of time, which derive from the gift made to them once and for all in Christ, a gift whose conditions were delivered to us by the prophets and the apostles'.<sup>25</sup> These initiatives of God are not simply the general working of divine providence. Congar writes that 'when the living God himself is the agent of historical events—not just by his general providence, but acting to constitute another element in salvation history, a "mystery"—he communicates to acts which take place in time certain possibilities and a density which surpass the conditions of earthly time'.<sup>26</sup> The unfolding of sacred history, then, is due to both human and divine agency, but Congar maintains that the initiative and the transformative power belong to God, the first cause present within all secondary, created causes. 'Sacred history, the history of the Church as the Church *of God*, is made out of the succession of God's "visitations" thanks to which men elicit those responses of faith and love by which the City of God is built up'.<sup>27</sup> Human beings are both active, then, and responsive. They are

<sup>22</sup> Congar, 'L'historicité de l'homme', pp. 299–300. Cf. Chenu, 'Situation humaine: corporalité et temporalité'.

<sup>23</sup> Congar, 'L'historicité de l'homme', p. 299.

<sup>24</sup> Congar, 'L'historicité de l'homme', p. 304.

<sup>25</sup> Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 263.

<sup>26</sup> Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 267.

<sup>27</sup> Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 269.



fully present in time, and also transcend time. Sacred history is both from below and from above.

### *The Sacramental Ontology of Sacred History*

A central principle to Congar's account is *relationship*. He affirms, 'As each order of things has its own proper ontology, so also there is an ontology of interpersonal relationships'. He continues, 'The ontology of sacred history is related to that found in the sacramental order, itself a unique phenomenon'.<sup>28</sup> Invoking Thomas's sacramental theology, Congar explains that just as the sacraments have a simultaneous, threefold reference, the time of the Church 'allows the sharing by men who follow each other through the centuries in an event which is historically unique and which took place at a different time'.<sup>29</sup> This entails a participatory proximity among the chronologically discrete moments of history, past, present, and future. Rather than speaking of the 'relation of the present to the past', Congar argues,

We ought rather to speak of the continuing presence of the past in the present, the continuing presence of those events which bring about a man's religious relation with God at each moment of time which is filled by them; the manner in which the Principle, the Beginning, is present in the whole of the developing relationship.<sup>30</sup>

In applying this sacramental ontology to the relationship between present and future, Congar refers to the 'radically eschatological' character of biblical ontology, according to which 'truth is found at the end of things'.<sup>31</sup> From a properly biblical perspective, Congar holds, 'the whole truth of something is at the end of its becoming, for then it corresponds to what the living God calls it to be'.<sup>32</sup> This notion is elsewhere correlated with his by-now-familiar interpretation of Thomas's Christian-Aristotelianism. Speaking of Thomas's eschatology, Congar remarks that 'This was for him the Christian and theological version of the Aristotelian philosophy of movement. The (Christian) man appears to him as essentially in movement toward an end which will be his achievement and his beatitude'.<sup>33</sup> The forward motion of history and tradition does not result in a severance with the past, on account of the deep sacramental structure and dynamic which governs

<sup>28</sup> Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 259.

<sup>29</sup> Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 260.

<sup>30</sup> Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 264.

<sup>31</sup> Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 265.

<sup>32</sup> Yves Congar, 'Theology of the Holy Spirit and Theology of History', in *Spirit of God: Short Writings on the Holy Spirit*, ed. Mark E. Ginter, trans. Susan Mader Brown (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018), pp. 138–39.

<sup>33</sup> Congar, 'L'historicité de l'homme', p. 299.

development toward the eschaton. The *temps de l'Église* thus has its own *durée propre*, which is marked both by an identity—the work of Christ—and also by a successive pattern of divine visitations, particularly appropriated to the Holy Spirit.<sup>34</sup>

### *Pneumatological and Eschatological Dynamics of Order*

The reality, continuity, and value of the Church's historical *devenir* is safeguarded, for Congar, by the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the characteristic work of the Holy Spirit 'to effect a communication between realities despite their limits and the distances separating them'.<sup>35</sup> Insistent that the continuity of tradition not be reduced to a static permanence, Congar argues that 'through one and the same movement the Holy Spirit is, within history, the principle of continuity or identity and the principle of newness, the Spirit of truth and the Spirit of freedom, the principle proper to the "new creation", which looks forward to the *eschaton* [Congar writes "eschatology"] and rises toward it'.<sup>36</sup> Correspondingly, 'Tradition is not the simple permanence of a structure, but a continual renewal and fertility *within* this given structure, which is guaranteed by a living and unchanging principle of identity. Of this divine principle, we can say that it concerns the relations between Christ and the Holy Spirit'.<sup>37</sup> Congar is thus clear that the history of the Church is not under merely 'general providence', but gains its unity, order, and finality from the activity of the Holy Spirit. Here the notion of transcendence only briefly adverted to in the context of human historicity recurs in the context of the Spirit's ordering of history toward the eschaton. Congar writes that 'by the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit the acts of the Church, still living and inserting its celebrations into the time of cosmic and human history, manage nevertheless in some way to go beyond temporal limits'.<sup>38</sup> The emphasis on, and close correlation of, pneumatology and eschatology is entirely typical of Congar's view of the way God operates 'from above' to guide and transform historical progress below. It is precisely by the Spirit's action that the temporal acts of human beings are 'inserted into another sphere of existence, the eschatological order'.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> See Congar, *La foi et la théologie*, p. 105. See also *Tradition and Traditions*, pp. 258–59.

<sup>35</sup> Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 261.

<sup>36</sup> Congar, 'Theology of the Holy Spirit', p. 139.

<sup>37</sup> Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 265.

<sup>38</sup> Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 261.

<sup>39</sup> Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 261.

*Ontological and Economic 'Moments' in Theology*

A recurrent theme in Congar's reception of Thomas is the weight he places on the latter's *sens de l'économie salutaire*. Even the use of the term 'economy' by Congar signals a hermeneutical approach that looks to find more and deeper points of contact between Thomas and, for instance, the thought of the Greek fathers. In Congar's own theological milieu, of course, the work of *ressourcement* theologians such as de Lubac, Daniélou, and Balthasar were bringing to the center of the scholarly conversation the fruits of their own studies of the Fathers of east and west. Yet the question that seems to have exercised Congar was whether Thomas, in addition to having a theology of God *in se*, had sufficiently developed a theology of God *pro nobis*. Hence his remarkable article in 1958, 'Le sens de l' "économie" salutaire dans la "théologie" de saint Thomas d'Aquin: (*Somme théologique*)', which over the course of nearly fifty pages arrays numerous heavily-documented arguments to the effect that Thomas, despite deliberately choosing to structure the *Summa theologiae* according to a *theological* rather than *economic* plan, nevertheless was constantly moving from and towards the revelation of God in the historical economy. Thomas's characteristic focus on all things *sub ratione Dei* is not at the cost of a rich sense of God's saving work in history.

One of the pieces of evidence Congar marshals in this article is Thomas's use of the principle that, in Congar's words, 'there is a greater power closer to the source or principle than there is farther from it' to explain how, 'if there was a time of the greatest grace, it was that of the apostles'.<sup>40</sup> Since this argument is connected to Thomas's rejection of Joachim of Fiore's proclamation of a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit and age of perfection, Thomas's principle and argument are a compact formulation, so Congar affirms, of his view of properly *ecclesial* history.

Congar's view of the economic character of Thomas's explanation of the apostolic perfection undergoes a striking shift by the time he publishes his article, 'Le moment "économique" et le moment "ontologique" dans la *Sacra doctrina* (Révélation, Théologie,

<sup>40</sup> Congar, 'Le sens de l' "économie" salutaire dans la "théologie" de Saint Thomas d'Aquin (*Somme Théologique*)', in *Glaube Und Geschichte: Festgabe Joseph Lortz* (Baden-Baden: Bruno Grimm, 1958), pp. 116–17. Thomas uses the principle in various forms and settings, but the relevant formulation is as follows: 'The ultimate consummation of grace was effected by Christ, wherefore the time of His coming is called the "time of fulness" (Gal. 4:4). Hence those who were nearest to Christ, wherefore before, like John the Baptist, or after, like the apostles, had a fuller knowledge of the mysteries of faith; for even with regard to man's state we find that the perfection is in youth, and that a man's state is all the more perfect, whether before or after, the nearer it is to the time of his youth' (*Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 1, a. 7 ad 4). Citations of Thomas taken from the text found at <https://aquinas.cc/>, based on the Shapcote translation.

*Somme théologique*)' in 1967. Far from signaling Thomas's *sens de l'économie*, the use of the principle that perfection is relative to the Christological center of history is now taken by Congar to represent a crack in the integrity of Thomas's thought and a dangerous step toward reducing the economy to theology, grace to nature, *Deus pro nobis* to *Deus in se* (God for us to God in himself), dynamic relationship to structure.<sup>41</sup>

Congar finds Thomas's explanation of the perfection of the apostles in *ST II-II*, q. 1, a. 7 ad 4 to verge dangerously on the rationalism of Congar's Neoscholastic contemporaries. In a critical paraphrase of Thomas's own formulation, Congar characterizes the invocation of 'the principle, physical as much as metaphysical, according to which the closer one is to a source of energy, the more one receives its influx' as a turn from the properly biblical-economic matrix of theology towards an ontological-ontic preoccupation with *things in themselves*.<sup>42</sup> He warns of the danger in seeking out the *quid* and the *ratio* of Christian realities in the 'desire of defining as much as possible their ontological status', since this leads to a rationalism that reduces the 'free purpose of grace' to the 'structures or general laws of nature'.<sup>43</sup> In Congar's estimation, the precarious path taken in scholastic theology leaves it perennially vulnerable to the decadence against which Luther rightly inveighed. God, the sovereignly active Subject, not the rational *quid* of an 'object', must remain the focus of faithful theology.

While Congar's more negative evaluation of Thomas's 'ontological' moment only occurs in 1967, his later judgment may not be simply reducible to a sudden change of mind. In fact, Congar's critical appraisal of Thomas on this score seems to derive ultimately from his own framing narrative of the development of scholastic theology from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the fateful decision to take the path of the *ordo cognitionis* over against the *ordo temporis*. This account of Thomas's place in the emergence of scholastic theology provides the narrational backdrop for the arguments in both the 1958 and the 1967 essays. Without denying that the profound transformation that theology underwent in the thirteenth century, it remains the case that the

<sup>41</sup> Congar's shifting assessment of the Thomistic principle does not occur in isolation. For a representative sampling of 'logical' and 'theological' theories of development that refer either directly or indirectly to this principle, see Francisco Marín-Sola, *The Homogeneous Evolution of Catholic Dogma* (Manila: Santo Tomas University Press, 1988), especially pp. 172-174; Henri de Lubac, 'The Problem of the Development of Dogma', in *Theology in History* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), especially pp. 258-59; Karl Rahner, 'The Development of Dogma', in *Theological Investigations*, trans. Cornelius Ernst, vol. 1 (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961), especially pp. 66-67; Edward Schillebeeckx, 'The Development of the Apostolic Faith into the Dogma of the Church', in *Revelation and Theology*, trans. N.D. Smith (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), especially pp. 59-60.

<sup>42</sup> Congar, 'Le moment "économique" et le moment "ontologique"', p. 180.

<sup>43</sup> Congar, 'Le moment "économique" et le moment "ontologique"', p. 180.

historian's designation of the decisive moment of rupture is, always and inevitably, the result of reconstruction and thus, necessarily, provisional. As noted above, the construction of a narrative of discontinuity in medieval theology in its scholastic and Aristotelian conversion serves an important purpose in Congar's formulation of the isomorphic relationship between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century socio-intellectual contexts. In this case, Congar's historical narrative—which identified Thomas as a sort of audacious *ressourcement* figure, inaugurating a new era through a retrieval of a deeper continuity with past sources of philosophical and theological wisdom—shows itself incapable of sustaining the burden of Congar's own ideological hesitations about and increasing ambivalence toward the intransigent 'ontological' element of Thomas's thought.

In his carefully worded criticisms of Thomas's analogy with a physical/metaphysical principle, Congar asks whether the coincidence of a natural law and the case of the apostles amounts to a 'homogeneity'. Suggesting that this flies in the face of the biblical portrait of the barren who give birth, and the youngest being preferred to the eldest, Congar sets up a polarity of the freedom of grace, on the one side, and the structure or law of nature on the other. After admitting that Thomas is not presuming to determine the necessity of the apostolic perfection, but to grasp its intelligibility, Congar then asks, 'Is this the right way (*Est-ce la bonne voie*)?'<sup>44</sup> In any event, he declares, it is a dangerous path (*une voie dangereuse*) for anyone lacking 'the admirable sense of transcendence and mystery, the humility and sensitivity of St. Thomas'.<sup>45</sup>

Congar attempts to balance his critical remarks with a reaffirmation of Thomas's fundamentally sound approach to *sacra doctrina*, noting that the contemplative character of Thomas's theological project both guided it and safeguarded it. Congar asserts both that Thomas himself was innocent of the rationalism and objectification of later scholastic theology, *and* that the dangerous, ontologizing tendency is inherent in a 'scientific' theology. Without simplifying the point to 'Congar doth protest too much', I suggest that Congar's comments—both descriptive and normative—on the place and role of the 'ontological moment' in theology shed light on the underlying principles of Congar's *ressourcement* project of mediation and the historical narrative that accompanies it. There is a sort of fundamental ambiguity in this project, shown in the use of Thomas to tell a particular kind of story, within which Thomas's own thought can be re-interpreted and appropriated. The nature of Congar's concerns regarding the relationship between the ontological and the economic, as well as his shift in attitude toward Thomas's use of a

<sup>44</sup> Congar, 'Le moment "économique" et le moment "ontologique"', p. 180. One might inquire in return whether he is asking if it is a good path in the sense of *truthful*, or in the sense of *pragmatically viable*.

<sup>45</sup> Congar, 'Le moment "économique" et le moment "ontologique"', p. 180.

'physical-metaphysical' principle, represent a deepened awareness that the way Thomas himself relates the ontological and economic does not sit easily with Congar's narrative-argument. Since it is only by emphasizing Thomas's virtues and graces that Congar can explain how Thomas avoided the rationalist tendencies of his successors, one should ask why Congar begins to handle Thomas's position in his own narrative with kid-gloves.

What comes to the surface in the 1967 article is a tension embedded in Congar's very project, possibly *ab initio*. Congar's re-evaluation of the 'ontological' element in Thomas's thought reveals an ambivalence toward an aspect of the tradition itself, namely its ontology of history. The ontology of history and tradition that Congar developed in conversation with Thomas awards a certain primacy to the concerns and conceptual starting points of the present—even where Congar is most adamant about the need to recover *sacra doctrina*. While this point will be taken up in detail in the following section, it is useful to note the rhetorical cue supplied in Congar's conclusion to 'Le moment "économique" et le moment "ontologique"', which opens with a statement of the guiding principle of Congar's *ressourcement* project of mediation of past and present, Church and world: 'There is a great urgency, today, to reconsider the close relationships that ought to exist between the economic moment and the ontological moment in *sacra doctrina*. It does not come only from the current situation, [but] from the missionary goal of *sacra doctrina*, taken at the level of prophetic and apostolic revelation as at the level of Christian preaching. It is a duty of the People of God to gather and nourish'.<sup>46</sup> As I will suggest in the next section, the interpretation of 'the current situation' and theology's 'missionary goal' that orients Congar's project of *ressourcement* and renewal derives its peculiar force not from the tradition, but from the present and the future.

### Post-Traditional Hermeneutics and the *Analogia entis historiae*

In his articulation of a theology of history and tradition through constant dialogue with Thomas Aquinas, Congar represents a significant 20<sup>th</sup> century attempt to mediate Thomistic *sacra doctrina* to distinctively modern theological questions and ecclesial-cultural concerns. A full appraisal of his achievement exceeds the scope of this essay. Instead, in this concluding section, I will sketch a few lines of response that can serve as critical probes of the ontology and hermeneutics of history that underlie Congar's theology of history. Kenneth Schmitz's notion of a 'post-traditional' conception of tradition will serve to set

<sup>46</sup> Congar, 'Le moment "économique" et le moment "ontologique"', pp. 181–82.

in relief the different metaphysical and interpretive presuppositions that inform 'traditional' and 'post-traditional' modes of approaching, conceptualizing, and practicing tradition.

In an article entitled 'What Happens to Tradition When History Overtakes It?', Kenneth Schmitz posits that 'We are not a traditional society, but neither are we without traditions'.<sup>47</sup> The contemporary situation of the West, he argues, is distinguished by being decisively 'post-traditional' in the way it conceives of tradition following the rise and subsequent hegemony of modern historical consciousness. The preoccupation with retrieving and rediscovering tradition presumes a certain dissolution of tradition. Thus, Schmitz observes,

[T]he status of tradition has shifted and its configuration has adapted to the new conditions. Indeed, it seems that, while the dissolution has occurred gradually and with increasing rapidity over the past several centuries in the West, both dissolution and rediscovery of tradition have occurred in close association with one another. They have brought about a mutual result: the consideration of tradition in a new status and configuration. Even more must be said: it is in and through the dissolution that the rediscovery has come about. For in the dissolution and rediscovery of tradition, modern thinkers have formulated, more precisely than before, the concept of Tradition as a specific category, whereas a traditional society had embraced it as an on-going practice.<sup>48</sup>

On this account, traditional and post-traditional societies exhibit a fundamentally different mode of conceiving of the past. Schmitz identifies two defining characteristics of the historical consciousness that determine the post-traditional view of the past. First, the sense of discontinuity between past and present motivates the methodical retrieval or reconstruction of the past. The felt gap of difference also 'introduces the concept of historicity, a concept that rests upon and is a modification of historical consciousness itself'.<sup>49</sup> Second, historical consciousness 'is more rational than it is historical', since 'the reconstruction of the past by modern historiography is carried out in accord with the criteria of the present, i.e., by standards of rationality that meet present day demands'.<sup>50</sup> There is thus a certain 'presentiality' inscribed within the historical method's dependence on critical rationality, which invisibly constrains the appearance and representation of history. As Schmitz notes, this is not only a transformation in the conceptualization of history, but reaches a deeper level.

<sup>47</sup> Kenneth L. Schmitz, 'What Happens to Tradition When History Overtakes It?', *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 68 (1994): p. 59.

<sup>48</sup> Schmitz, 'What Happens to Tradition', p. 64.

<sup>49</sup> Schmitz, 'What Happens to Tradition', p. 66.

<sup>50</sup> Schmitz, 'What Happens to Tradition', p. 66.

Now, the effect of this inversion of past and present and the primacy of the present that is constitutive of historical consciousness brings about the loss of what I have called the ontological weight of the traditional past—its power to guide the society and the individual from out of itself and to penetrate the whole being of its bearers and recipients.<sup>51</sup>

If the challenge is to 'balance a post-traditional sense of tradition with the claims of an historical consciousness that is acutely aware of the element of newness, the gap of difference, and the difficulty of access to the past', Schmitz suggests one possible response: 'tradition does not so much need its own logic as it needs new conditions of being and a re-evaluation of the moments of time'.<sup>52</sup>

Schmitz's argument raises important questions for Congar's project. Clearly, Congar's theology of tradition is, rather paradoxically, post-traditional, in that the gap of difference is the condition of possibility for such a project of *ressourcement* and mediation, which seeks to close or at least bridge the gap between past and present. What remains far from clear in Congar's thought is the extent to which he is aware that he shares the ontological and hermeneutical commitments of post-traditional historical consciousness, especially its critical rationality and 'presentiality'. Fergus Kerr has used the label 'sapiential-ontological' to describe Congar's synthetic theological approach, which he declares is continuous with Thomas's own sapiential-ontological approach in considering all things *sub ratione Dei*.<sup>53</sup> This comparison, however, threatens to erase an important distinction of which Congar himself was quite conscious. Congar's post-traditional approach blends the sapiential-ontological approach with the modern historical approach. For all his work to retrieve a Thomistic concept of history and historicity, Congar never lost sight of the fact that Thomas himself did *not* articulate his *sens de l'histoire*. He may have had one, but it is only through Congar's *ressourcement* that Thomas emerges as a historically-sensitive thinker. In fact, as shown above, Congar's mediation of Thomas to his own theological and cultural milieu is far from total or uncritical. Two aspects of his reception of Thomas invite further scrutiny.

First, Congar's valorization of an Aristotelian-Thomistic notion of historicity is, on its surface, plausible and even compelling. What is remarkable, however, is that the *concept* of historicity is never interrogated. It is presumed that historicity is a normative concept that has been only recently discovered, yet belongs essentially to human nature. In Congar's usage, historicity plays a crucial role in the 'from below' dimension of sacred history. Emphasizing human reason's

<sup>51</sup> Schmitz, 'What Happens to Tradition', p. 66.

<sup>52</sup> Schmitz, 'What Happens to Tradition', p. 69, p. 66.

<sup>53</sup> See Fergus Kerr, 'Yves Congar and Thomism', in *Yves Congar: Theologian of the Church*, ed. Gabriel Flynn (Louvain: Peeters, 2005), pp. 92–94.



discursivity and partial, successive character, Congar implies that 'historicity' serves as the principle of *discontinuity* in his theologico-historical construction. While he refers to humanity's transcendence of time as essential for it to have a history, this point remains underdeveloped. Indeed, the impression is that humanity is, by nature, 'condemned to a fragmented and successive mode of knowing'—and living, for that matter.<sup>54</sup> It is striking then, that it is only within the properly *theological* account of ontology of sacred history (and thus the *ordo gratiae*) that history seems to gain any sort of shape or unity. It could well be asked, then, whether Congar's emphasis on the eschatological and pneumatological dynamics of order are meant to supply for what is lacking in the natural (as opposed to supernatural) order of human history.

Second, Schmitz proposed that the way toward balancing a transformed sense of tradition and historical consciousness requires 'new conditions of being' and a recovered receptivity to the 'ontological weight' of tradition. Apropos of Congar's theology of history, we might take up this point and ask whether his ambivalence toward the 'ontological moment' signals a reluctance to allow his own hermeneutics and ontology of history to be interrogated by what he encounters in Thomas's thought. In other words, is Congar the theologian-historian genuinely open to receiving the full ontological weight of tradition that imbues and sustains Thomas's thought? Or is he mining Thomas's thought for conceptual forms that fit within the basic framework already identified by Congar as useful or valuable for his own context? Is it conceivable that Thomas would have an ontology of history (and coordination of the 'economic' and 'ontological') that is genuine and at the same time differs—even drastically so—from that presupposed in 20<sup>th</sup> century theological discussions?

A possible corrective to Congar's account is to deepen the participatory ontology that is present but elusive in his thought. Matthew Levering has called for a retrieval of a conception of history 'not only as a linear unfolding of individual moments, but also as an ongoing participation in God's active providence, both metaphysically and Christologically-pneumatologically'.<sup>55</sup> Of these elements, as already noted, Congar places a heavy stress on the pneumatological principle for the participatory nature of history. Yet in the close association of the Holy Spirit's work and the strongly eschatological determination of past and present, it is difficult to see how Congar does not introduce a sharp discontinuity between nature and grace, or between what Congar terms 'human history' and 'sacred history'. How successful is Congar at integrating a 'participatory understanding of reality, which

<sup>54</sup> Congar, 'Theology of the Holy Spirit', p. 138.

<sup>55</sup> Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), p. 1.

flows both from faith (the order of grace) and from metaphysical reflection (the order of creation)?<sup>56</sup> In short, recovering a participatory ontology of history may be a crucial step toward gaining an understanding of what Francis Martin suggestively terms the *analogia entis historiae*.<sup>57</sup>

The implications of these few probing remarks for the theological question of doctrinal development may be summarized briefly. First, the concept of history of historicity embedded in the debate can and should be interrogated, in light of the distinction between traditional and post-traditional 'conditions of being'. To that end, theology can look to past figures (e.g. Thomas) who lack a 'theory' of development for resources not only in adequate conceptual forms, but also in the integrated ontological-hermeneutical understandings they bring to bear in their own reception of the tradition. To be clear, access to the resources of these figures, such as Thomas, requires an ontology of history that would allow them equal if not greater authority over our normative concepts. To adopt a participatory ontology—with a correspondingly analogical hermeneutics of history—would amount to a step 'toward'—if not tradition, then an integration of a post-traditional sense of tradition within a renewed theological wisdom.<sup>58</sup>

*Paul Clarke OP*  
*Providence College (USA)*

*paul.clarke@providence.edu*

<sup>56</sup> Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, p. 6.

<sup>57</sup> Francis Martin, 'Literary Theory, Philosophy of History, and Exegesis', *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 52, no. 4 (1988): p. 603.

<sup>58</sup> The 'hermenéutica analógica' of the Mexican philosopher and Dominican friar, Mauricio Beuchot, offer intriguing possibilities in this regard. See Mauricio Beuchot, 'Microcosmos e Historia', *Diálogos: Artes, Letras, Ciencias humanas* 21, no. 7 (127) (1985): pp. 3–9; 'La analogía como doctrina medieval y su utilización actual en una hermenéutica analógica', *Angelicum* 83, no. 4 (2006): pp. 793–802; 'Elementos esenciales de una hermenéutica analógica', *Diánoia* 60, no. 74 (2015): pp. 127–145.