

RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Anglican *nouvelle théologie*: Eric Mascall on Christ and the Church

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Abstract

An article reviewing the work of Eric Mascall and suggesting that he is developing an Anglican *nouvelle théologie*. The importance of Mascall's work on Christ and the Church is also explored.

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It was my honour to have Eric Mascall as the external examiner for my doctorate in Oxford in 1975, and, prior to that, he had offered counsel and support in my theological work and vocational exploration. After the doctoral examination, we continued to be in touch for many years, to my great profit, despite abiding divergences on some issues. As I have often observed, I find, going back to his books now, the frequent sense which one has on returning to a treasured book from the past – ‘Ah: *that's* why I think that.’ The opportunity to pay this tribute to him is profoundly welcome.

In the later sixties, when I began the study of theology, there was, you might say, something of a simple binary at work in a lot of the theological faculties of this country. If you were a member of a courageous, slightly exotic minority, you might want to be some sort of a Barthian; and if you wanted to be in the swim of things, you might want to be some kind of revisionist, sceptical of the catholic credal formularies. When I started reading Eric Mascall seriously in around 1968, it occurred to me that there was another possible way of approaching theology that had rather a lot to be said for it, as it managed to hold together a degree of philosophical rigour and sophistication (including an impressive refusal to be panicked by the advance of natural science), a genuine seriousness about the doctrinal tradition, a deep commitment to the sacramental life of the Church, and a basic engagement with the disciplines of contemplative practice. That fusion, expressed in so many of Eric Mascall's works, is one which, in a small way, I have tried to hold on to as my model of how theology ought to be done. So I speak out of a

strong sense of grateful obligation to a generous mind, a devoted priest as well as a great thinker.

How is he generally seen within the Anglican landscape by those who take the trouble to look at all? As we've been reminded in this colloquium, the first thing that will come to the minds of most people who have any sense of the contours of twentieth-century Anglophone theology is that Eric Mascall is above all an interpreter of the neo-Thomist school of Étienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain. He is a writer who steeped himself in the largely French-speaking retrieval, in the second quarter of the twentieth century, of Thomas Aquinas, and who digests this retrieval in extremely accessible form, in a series of works that, in the view of many, increasingly move off in the direction of devotional reflection, 'occasional' writing, and even polemics. What I want to suggest here is that this is a very inadequate rendering of Mascall and his legacy. And, in particular, I want to challenge, or at least to open up to further exploration, what has been said about Mascall as simply a 'neo-Thomist'. A point that has already been made in our discussions is that Mascall is a deeply *hospitable* theologian. His doors are open to a variety of theological voices from Europe. They are less open to some of the contemporary theological voices of the Anglosphere in the mid-twentieth century – which may be no bad thing; but more on that later. The particular point I want to make is that this hospitality is not just directed towards Gilson and Maritain; it extends to a variety of French Catholic thinkers from the mid-twentieth century who are more or less closely associated with what we've come to call *nouvelle théologie* – the generation that challenged a rather sterile scholastic consensus (a consensus rather more stringently imposed and managed than that consensus ought to be) and paved the way for some aspects of the era of Vatican II. As we recognize, this involved an opening out into a rediscovery of patristic tradition, a more critically and historically nuanced biblical scholarship, and a creative approach to how doctrine and philosophy intersect. In short, my aim is to present Mascall as someone who can helpfully be read as an Anglican exponent of *nouvelle théologie*, with a certain number of Anglican 'specifics' that give him a distinctive profile in such a context.

The first major academic work that drew attention to Mascall as a thinker (not his first publication; he had written a couple of brief earlier works, including a lucid digest of St John of the Cross) was probably *He who is: a study in traditional theism*, first published in 1943.¹ This very thorough and lucid work deals broadly with Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of God, but it is rooted in a deeper and wider theological tradition. It offers a helpful perspective on what we can and what we cannot expect from the so-called 'proofs of God's existence' or the 'Five Ways' of St Thomas' *Summa*, and it is a very workmanlike guide to some of the main themes of classical Thomism, as retrieved, especially, by the work of Étienne Gilson.²

Clearly, however, Mascall felt there was unfinished business after the writing of this work. This unfinished business has something to do with the question of analogy: a major theme in Thomist thinking, especially as revived in the twentieth century, this has to do with locating and consolidating the classic 'middle way' between univocity and equivocity, to use the technical terms. That is to say: when we

¹Mascall, E. L., *He who is: a study in traditional theism* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1943).

²See Mascall's references to Gilson in *He who is*, pp. 30, 32, 35, 40, 47, 68, 85, 96.

talk about God, we are neither saying of God things that we would say in exactly the same sense in talking about objects within the universe, nor using terms about God in a sense so unique to God that they do not map on to any other usage. To speak analogically is to use words in the sense we believe to be appropriate to the reality we're speaking of; a single word will change its meaning in some respects depending on what we are talking about, yet without cutting loose entirely from some kind of 'kinship' with other uses. What 'appropriateness to the reality we're speaking of' will be very variously qualified and analysed, as it is by Thomist thinkers through the centuries, so as to guide us between the Scylla and Charybdis of excessive overconfidence in the comprehensiveness or total truthfulness of theological talk on the one hand and the pitfalls of supposing that we can say nothing useful, true, or really interesting about God on the other.

In *He who is*, Mascall touches very briefly on this question, and it is clear that he regarded what he said there as incomplete. Six years later, he published a shorter book, *Existence and Analogy*³ (those of you who have been looking at bookstalls lately may have noticed that a new edition of this has just appeared, with a new introduction⁴). This book is a rather underrated work in the Mascall canon: returning to it recently in order to write the introduction for our new edition, I was struck by how exploratory and bold it was for its time, and how many theological and metaphysical themes of more recent times it adumbrates with great eloquence. Essentially, what Mascall is doing in this book is to put something of a bomb underneath most traditional accounts of analogy. He claims here, in effect, that far too much of the discussion of analogy in the world of mid-century neo-Thomist discourse is reduced to a set of questions about what 'licenses' you to talk about God. Mascall responds by noting that we are never in the position of waiting to start speaking about God; we are always already talking about – and to – God. We do not need a certificate to allow us to do it that spells out in exactly what sense we're using the words we use.⁵ And the fact that we have already started is an index of the fact that our apprehension of God is absolutely bound up with an apprehension, a direct apprehension, of the kind of beings we are and the kind of being that is exemplified by every substance around us in the universe: we are all beings *in the process of becoming*, beings whose activity does not yet fully correspond with what we most deeply are. We are work in progress. But to see ourselves and the world around us as 'work in progress' is to grasp, however indirectly, the idea of the fundamental reality of agency, free agency or unconditional energy, as we might say, that is not in the process of becoming, and whose action coincides wholly with what it is. In the classical language of Thomism, God's *essentia*, God's essence, is God's *esse*, God's act of being. God's act of being is what God *is*. There's no wedge to be driven between those two terms; but if this is the case, then, when this infinite and unconditioned act of being generates the finite world, it is impossible that the eternal act of being could simply as it were – snap its fingers and release a world into empty, measureless, formless space beyond itself. The world subsists, moment by moment,

³Mascall, E. L., *Existence and analogy: a sequel to He who is* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1949).

⁴Mascall, E. L., *Existence and analogy: a sequel to He who is*, ed. Clinton Collister, with a foreword by Rowan Williams (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2023).

⁵See Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, pp. 92–121, especially pp. 94–95.

because unconditioned action sustains it; the very root of all that we are, moment by moment, is the act of God. And for us as humans, this is true in a very specific sense because of our creation in the image of God.

There is no level of our being from which God, as unconditional act, is absent. Mascall very rightly sees this as fundamental to St Thomas and to the whole tradition out of which St Thomas comes, both Augustinian and Eastern Christian, with its interest in the 'participation' of the finite in the infinite. And he presents this as licensing us to go around and beyond various kinds of 'stand-off' in the understanding of analogy in the neo-Thomist world, and to rethink analogy in terms of what we could call our 'primitive', given capacity to encounter and respond to the action of God in the interactions of this world, recognizing that what we encounter in active finite reality is simply, in and through the medium of created agency, what God is doing. That category of 'what God is doing' is not instantly obvious; it is not an episode or an item or an aspect of finite reality. But there it is as the ground, the rationale and the sustaining energy of whatever there in fact *is*. Mascall is saying something quite specific and slightly unusual here, something, indeed, rather radical in his day and in his theological milieu, requiring us to rescue analogy from being seen as a mere set of linguistic protocols and to restore it as a means of envisaging how creation participates in the life of the Creator. Here and elsewhere, he will explain that the ways in which different kinds of creatures participate in the life of the Creator are, of course, appropriate to their level of will and intelligence; and we human beings, created in the image of God, bear a very specific dignity and a very specific responsibility because of this.⁶

It's clear from the text of *Existence and Analogy* that Mascall has begun to dip into resources rather wider than just the strictly neo-Thomist world. References like those in *He Who Is* to a rather earlier generation of neo-Thomists are thinner on the ground here; there is more citation from some kinds of contemporary English-language discussion,⁷ and, fleetingly but importantly, there is a reference to Henri de Lubac's great work *Surnaturel*.⁸ De Lubac's presence in Mascall's work has already been touched on in our discussions, and I agree entirely with those who see it as crucially important. He was reading in the Forties not only de Lubac's articles and books on the 'supernatural' but also his great essay in synthesis, *Catholicisme*,⁹ an overview of what 'Catholic' identity really means in terms of a comprehensive anthropology as well as an ecclesiology, an anthropology in which the interlocking, reciprocal character of humanity is affirmed.¹⁰

⁶See especially 'God and the Creature', Chapter Six of *Existence and Analogy*, pp. 122–57.

⁷See in particular Chapter 7 of *Existence and Analogy* ('Two Recent Discussions of Theism'), which discusses Austin Farrer's *Finite and Infinite* (pp. 158–75) and Dorothy M. Emmet's *Nature of Metaphysical Thinking* (pp. 175–81). See also references throughout the book to Farrer's *Finite and Infinite* (pp. 79, 89, 92, 108).

⁸de Lubac, Henri, *Surnaturel* (Paris: Aubier, 1946), cited in Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, p. 185, Footnote 2.

⁹de Lubac, Henri, *Catholicisme. Les Aspects sociaux du dogme* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1938).

¹⁰See, for example, Mascall's frequent references to *Catholicisme* in Mascall, E. L., *Christ, the Christian and the Church: a study of the incarnation and its consequences* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1946), pp. 112, 131, 137, 139, 143, 145, 146, 149, 151, 193, 201.

There is no repudiation of Gilson and his school; how could he be other than important for a theologian like Mascall? Gilson's magisterial works on the Christian philosophies of Augustine,¹¹ Aquinas,¹² Scotus¹³ and St Bernard¹⁴ remain the peak of what you might call ultra-intelligent textbook writing, and are still pretty indispensable for any serious engagement with the intellectual history of the Middle Ages.¹⁵ But Mascall's perspective has begun to roam more widely. The French Catholic retrieval of a less sclerotic version of how to talk about creator and creature, how to talk about nature and grace, is clearly in evidence. Long before Mascall's famous Gifford Lectures on *The openness of being*, published in the early Seventies,¹⁶ in which he tackles transcendental Thomism¹⁷ and the work of Karl Rahner¹⁸ with great sympathy, he has already aligned himself with a strand of Catholic thinking that is not simply 'neo-Thomist'. As we have seen, it is not radically at odds, with the neo-Thomism of Gilson, though Gilson's own reaction to de Lubac and others was often lukewarm, unhappy that the Thomist synthesis was being sold rather short in the versions of it questioned by the newer writers. But Mascall, with the *nouveaux théologiens*, takes some steps further. He will say in more than one of his works of this period that he has begun to look more sympathetically at the philosophical legacy of Maurice Blondel, for example, whose intellectual influence in the world of the *nouvelle théologie* is so considerable. Mascall goes so far as to hint that he has come to see Blondel's philosophy of action as offering more possibilities for a Christian metaphysic than most forms of neo-Thomism. Already, in the 1940s, he has moved significantly away from Neo-Thomism alone into something more grounded in the *ressourcement* tradition gaining traction in post-War France, affirming very clearly the convergence of nature and supernature, challenging the idea of *pura natura* (a world theoretically considered in abstraction from the actual grace and gift of the creator), challenging any notion that there could be an intelligible, comprehensive account of human nature which left openness to grace out of the picture, and so on.

He continues to rework, not to say recycle, some of these ideas in books from the Fifties to the Seventies (Mascall is one of those writers who will, both helpfully and frustratingly, return to the same formulae and arguments repeatedly with minor but

¹¹Gilson, Étienne, *Introduction à l'étude de s. Augustin*, Paris, Vrin 1929 (English translation by L.E.M. Lynch, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, New York, Random House 1960).

¹²Gilson, Étienne, *Le Thomisme: Introduction au Système de saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 1919). In *He Who Is* (p. 203), Mascall references the third (1927) edition of Gilson's book on Aquinas, along with the following English translation: Gilson, Étienne, *The Philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas*, trsl. E. Bullough (Cambridge: Heffer, 2nd edition 1929).

¹³Gilson, Étienne, *Jean Duns Scot, introduction à ses positions fondamentales* (Paris: Vrin, 1952).

¹⁴Gilson, Étienne, *La théologie mystique de saint Bernard* (Paris: Vrin, 1934). In *He who is* (p. 203), Mascall references the following English translation: Gilson, Étienne, *The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard*, trsl. A. H. C. Downes (London: Sheed and Ward, 1940).

¹⁵See also, more broadly, Gilson, Étienne, *La Philosophie au Moyen-Âge de Scot Érigène à Guillaume d'Occam* (Paris: Payot, 1930), which Mascall references in *He Who Is* (p. 203).

¹⁶Mascall, E. L., *The openness of being: natural theology today* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971).

¹⁷See Mascall, *The openness of being*, pp. 59–74 ('Transcendental Thomism – I') and 75–90 ('Transcendental Thomism – II').

¹⁸See especially Mascall, *The openness of being*, pp. 67–74 and 233–45; see also pp. 132, 172, 196.

non-trivial verbal refinements). Reference was made in an earlier discussion here to the little book, *The importance of being human*, which he published in 1959,¹⁹ and to the St Michael's Lectures at Gonzaga University on *Nature and Supernature* in 1976.²⁰ *Nature and Supernature* does indeed recycle a good deal of *The Importance of Being Human* – if not quite in the same words, with the same basic structure of argument. And it is interesting to note that, in *Nature and Supernature*, he uses a very *nouvelle théologie* methodology to question some of the ideas of Austin Farrer. Mascall's devotion to and admiration for Austin Farrer were second to none, and he admits very freely in *Existence and Analogy* the debt that he owes to Farrer's *Finite and Infinite*.²¹ Yet, even in *Existence and Analogy*, he's expressing a couple of reservations.²² By the time of *Nature and Supernature* in the mid-Seventies, he takes this a little further. His final chapter on 'Nature and Grace' refers to Farrer's well-known use of the old parable that God in creating as it were 'withdraws' His glory so that the world may have space to be.²³ And Mascall comments:

I find these passages moving and seductive, but I am very suspicious of any attempt to account for the secondary causality of creatures by limiting the primary causality of God. And even Farrer's treatment of man as a special case does not remove my hesitation. The notion that God had to withdraw himself from a certain sphere to make room for his creatures does not seem to me to be a happy one [. . .] It seems to me much more satisfactory to start from the traditional position that God moves all secondary causes according to their natures [. . .] God is not excluded from the act [of human being] or reduced to the condition of a spectator, but is the primary agent in it.²⁴

And,

when a man tries to exclude God from the act and make himself the primary agent, all that he manages to do is to introduce an element of sheer destruction and negation. [. . .] To try to exclude God from one's act is to repudiate one's ontological status as dependent on God [. . .].²⁵

What makes this interesting is that what he is doing here is to use Farrer against Farrer. A commitment to the 'non-competitive' nature of the relation between finite and infinite is at the core of so much of Farrer's own work, and yet Farrer can rhetorically use at one or two points this language of 'divine withdrawing', as though there had to be less of God for creation to have room to be. Mascall, very characteristically, does not let him get away with it.

¹⁹Mascall, E. L., *The importance of being human: some aspects of the Christian doctrine of man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959).

²⁰Mascall, E. L., *Nature and supernature* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976).

²¹See Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, pp. x, xviii, xix, 69, 89, 92-94, 108, 138, 158-75.

²²See Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, pp. 79, 158-59, 171, 174-75, 181.

²³See Mascall, *Nature and Supernature*, pp. 79-80, quoting Farrer, Austin, 'Thinking the Trinity', in *A Celebration of Faith*, ed. Leslie Houlden (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970), pp. 72-73.

²⁴Mascall, *Nature and Supernature*, pp. 80-81.

²⁵Mascall, *Nature and Supernature*, p. 81.

It is worth noting also, as we look at the evolution of Mascall's thought from the Forties to the Seventies, that, running through this process of development it is a legacy from his early engagement with the work of St John of the Cross. He notes, in *The Importance of Being Human*, that grace works, as often as not, *imperceptibly*, in the depth of created being, speaking in a way which echoes very closely the way in which St John of the Cross writes about the 'ground' or 'substance' of the soul.²⁶ When St John of the Cross talks about 'substantial touches' that occur in the state of union, he's talking about the way in which, imperceptibly, the divine reaches to the very heart and base of finite reality, human reality in particular, and builds renewal from there.²⁷ The supernaturalization which grace produces, he writes, operates in the very substance of human nature, far beneath the level of observable behaviour, even if it ultimately produces effects on the observable level.²⁸ I suspect that this fusion of Thomist *nouvelle théologie* and a Carmelite perspective on sanctification reflects a continuing concern on Mascall's part to anchor his thinking in the contemplative discipline about which he had written in the very early years of his theological career, especially when he is writing and thinking about grace and nature in his most mature works.²⁹

As we have noted, there is a consistent challenge to the idea of 'pure nature', finite humanity considered in independence of the divine. But there is equally no compromising of the 'gratuity' of grace – simply because the finite world is a world of substances in becoming, necessarily open to the unpredictability of the act of God in perfecting their created being. As Mascall notes in more than one of his later works, it is completely mistaken to suppose that talking about 'substance' in theology commits you to a picture of closed natures bumping up against each other. On the contrary: finite substance is precisely what is produced by eternal *esse*, the temporally extended realizing of an innately dynamic form. And this means that, in one sense, the entire debate about where 'nature' stops and 'supernature' starts is abstract and artificial. We are made to be in God's image and thus made so as to grow in a certain direction, towards self-transcendence. We are made to grow into a depth beyond what we can readily cope with, expect or imagine. To borrow language from another tradition, we are made for 'ecstasy' in the strictest sense of the word, a 'standing beyond' ourselves, a going beyond our limitation. This is what we are, our substance or finite essence, the kind of being we are. This does not compromise the utter freedom of God's grace; it does not give us the basis for any resentment against God on the grounds that God has failed to provide the grace to which we have some natural right. Our response to, our living into this growth towards transcendence, is bound up with our freedom, and so with the conditions in

²⁶See Mascall, *The Importance of Being Human*, p. 65: 'First, then, the supernaturalisation which grace produces operates in the very substance of human nature, far beneath the level of observable behavior [sic], even if it ultimately produces effects on the observable level.'

²⁷See St John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, II, 23, 11–14 (ed. and trsl. E. Allison Peers), *The Complete Works of Saint John of the Cross, Doctor of the Church: translated from the critical edition of P. Silverio de Santa Teresa, C. D., and edited by E. Allison Peers*, vol. 1 (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1934), pp. 481–83.

²⁸See Mascall, *The Importance of Being Human*, pp. 481–83.

²⁹See, for example, Mascall's blend of the two in *Grace and Glory* (London: The Faith Press, 1961), pp. 38–39, 41–42, 47–48, 51, 78.

which we are learning and growing in faith in the Body of Christ. I shall come back shortly to one of the particular French sources that may be helpful on clarifying this. But in short, it is just because of the temporal, mutable nature of finite reality that we can understand that any adequate notion of finite nature or essence is always going to be fluid and mobile, involved in growth.

This is some of the basic background of what Mascall is digesting, reflecting on and communicating, a perspective both Thomist and shaped by the *nouvelle théologie*, with the latter coming into focus still more clearly as he unites his metaphysical thinking with more strictly dogmatic and systematic concerns. This is very plain in his book on *Christ, the Christian and the Church*, published in 1946,³⁰ a work that is by common consent his most comprehensive and systematic treatise on theology – and, in my judgement, one of the very best books in systematic theology in the English language in the last 120 years. Read it alongside *Existence and Analogy*, and you can see that the kind of systematic theology of Church and Sacraments that Mascall is developing, and, even more significantly, the kind of Christology that he elaborates belong closely with the metaphysical insights to do with the relation between God and creation that he will set out in *Existence and Analogy*. From *Christ, the Christian and the Church* right through to a later work like, say, *Theology and the Gospel of Christ* in 1977 –³¹ there is a very consistent Christocentrism in Mascall's writing – especially, but not exclusively, in his writing on dogmatic theology; and this is related to the fundamental, metaphysical convictions he begins with and to the doctrine of God he works with. If the relation between God and creation is as Mascall says it is, if there is no way in which the finite act can be simply surgically extracted from its grounding in infinite agency, even as a thought experiment, then it ought to be clear that it is the threefold action of God that gives shape and coherence to finite life in general and human life in particular. In *Existence and Analogy*, there is a passage in which he suddenly veers off from metaphysical to doctrinal reflection – not wholly unexpectedly, but still rather surprisingly. The entire set of issues around finite and infinite being, he suggests, will look different and far more deeply intelligible when we see it against the backdrop of what Christian faith claims about God's self-revelation:

When [...] we see the question in the setting of the Christian revelation, a flood of light illuminates it. Yes, we reflect, *bonum est diffusivum sui*, [the good is the diffusion of itself], and the divine goodness must pour itself forth. But just because its diffusiveness is infinite it cannot find an adequate expression in the production of any finite being. No possible world can [...] exhaust the divine bounty; the perfect expression of the divine love means the generation of an Other who is himself divine, since he receives from God all that God himself is. Only God can be an adequate object of the love of God; and the *necessary* manifestation of the Father's goodness is the eternal generation of the Son. Yet the Son, though he is God, is not a second God, a *heteros theos*. For the Father

³⁰Mascall, E. L., *Christ, the Christian and the Church: a study of the incarnation and its consequences* (London etc.: Longmans, Green and Co., 1946).

³¹Mascall, E. L., *Theology and the Gospel of Christ: An Essay in Reorientation* (London: SPCK, 1977).

communicates to the Son, in begetting him, not anything that he makes, not even anything that he has, but the very nature [. . .] that he is.³²

Mascall is here beginning to draw out from his metaphysical presuppositions about the essential outpouring of infinite action a kind of Trinitarian apologetic; and in doing this, he is already building a bridge into a Christology and an ecclesiology, because the infinite divine life which is the Son takes flesh, takes our nature, in Jesus Christ, so that our finite nature is thereby taken into the immeasurable, unconditioned life of the everlasting Son. This is what redemption is. For Mascall in this passage, it is not that, once you have clarity about the metaphysical relation of finite and infinite, you will immediately go on to draw any kind of strictly logical conclusion about the nature of the Trinity, but you will at least see why the doctrine of the Trinity makes sense; and once you have begun to see why the Trinity makes sense, you will see why Christology makes sense. Likewise, once you see how and why Christology makes sense, you begin to see why the Church makes sense; and so on into the full doctrinal and spiritual synthesis that is *Christ, the Christian and the Church*, reflected also in *Corpus Christi*,³³ and in several other more directly theological works across the decades.

Mascall is consistently concerned to frame his specifically doctrinal reflection against the background of his metaphysics of finite and infinite, and equally to allow the metaphysics to be illuminated and filled out by doctrinal insights. In the long section of *Theology and the Gospel of Christ* entitled 'Christology Today',³⁴ which is practically a book in itself, he explores with great sophistication, the flaws and shortcomings of most kinds of revisionist twentieth-century Christology. He tackles writers like John Hick³⁵ and Maurice Wiles,³⁶ and he points back, as he so often does, to what, in *Existence and Analogy*, he has identified as Thomist 'existentialism',³⁷ that is, to St Thomas' interest in existence, God's active being, rather than some static divine essence; the eternal pure act of God's being. The divine essence is beyond our conceptualities, we cannot determine what it would be 'like' to be God; we know God in act. And this is central to why we treat Trinitarian doctrine and Christology as so basic in theology – or at least in any theology that is seriously committed to a doctrine of salvation and transfiguration. Here again, he turns to French sources. In *Theology and the Gospel of Christ* he discusses, in varying degrees of detail, three French writers on Christology. One is the formidable philosopher and historian of religion, Claude Tresmontant,³⁸ the second is Louis Bouyer, the great historian of spirituality,³⁹ and the third (probably least well-known) is the Jesuit Jean Galot, a writer on systematic theology and spirituality.⁴⁰

³²Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, p. 128; emphasis Mascall's.

³³Mascall, E. L., *Corpus Christi: Essays on the Church and the Eucharist* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1953).

³⁴Mascall, *Theology and the Gospel of Christ*, pp. 119–208.

³⁵See Mascall, *Theology and the Gospel of Christ*, pp. 122–25, 134, 202–07.

³⁶See Mascall, *Theology and the Gospel of Christ*, pp. 121, 133, 146, 202–07.

³⁷See Chapter 3 ('The Existentialism of St. Thomas') in Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, pp. 44–64.

³⁸See Mascall, *Theology and the Gospel of Christ*, pp. 139–44.

³⁹See Mascall, *Theology and the Gospel of Christ*, pp. 144–51.

⁴⁰See Mascall, *Theology and the Gospel of Christ*, pp. 151–188.

Mascall is clearly fascinated by Galot's work; it evidently seemed to him to offer a way of doing justice to the human consciousness of Jesus without falling into some kind of Nestorianism or Scotism.⁴¹ The details of this would take us rather far afield. But the use of Tresmontant and Bouyer is very significant: Tresmontant was someone who was very significantly influenced by Blondel's philosophy of action, mentioned above, and it is not hard to see how this appropriation of Blondel's legacy would be consonant with the increasingly distinctive kind of Thomism Mascall is advocating.⁴²

Ultimately, what Mascall is arguing, in his doctrinal works from *Christ, the Christian and the Church* through to *Theology and the Gospel of Christ* and beyond, is that we need a fully traditional Chalcedonian Christology, affirming the fullness of Jesus' divine and human nature and the fullness of the divine nature of the eternal Word, in order not just to have a good ecclesiology, but to have any ecclesiology at all. We shall have no ecclesiology if all we have to say about Jesus of Nazareth is that He is a virtuous dead man. If Jesus of Nazareth is indeed a virtuous dead man, then the Church is no more than a human association of people faintly inspired by the reputation and legacy of this distinguished figure from the past. But if Jesus is what the definition of Chalcedon affirms Him to be, the Church is where we live in Christ; a more theologically and humanly interesting proposition. With something of a backward glance to earlier discussions this morning, it is fair to say that Mascall's ecclesiology, precisely because it is focused on this fundamental sense of the Church as the place where we live in Christ, and therefore, where we finite beings come to fulfilment within the divine life, offers a deeply liberating perspective on the Church, releasing us from the variety of anxieties about the local civil wars of Christians within the institution, and returning our gaze to the foundational mystery of the trinitarian life lived in the midst of the finite universe.

In classical theological terms, the divine hypostasis of the Word is a 'subsistent mode of divine relation', and this is the ground for a theology of our inclusion in Christ. If Jesus Christ is another individual, we can relate to Him only as to another individual within the world. But if Jesus Christ is the embodiment of that level, mode, activation of divinity that is the everlasting Word, then this Word has not contingent boundaries to keep us out; there is 'room' for us in that everlasting mode of life. We are drawn in by grace and the action of the Spirit to a mode of relation to God the Father which promises our own fulfilment – our own creaturehood coming to its full realization in an endless journey to the depths of the divine. This is the point at which Mascall can draw so eloquently from the contemplative tradition of Catholic Christianity to flesh this out further, and where he also has things to say about sacramental life and the life of discipleship, in the light of the affirmation of Christ's full humanity, which establishes that the Incarnation truly is the infinite eternal Word 'using' who and what we are for our own good and our own redemptive transformation. The last chapter of *The Importance of Being Human*, which is simply entitled 'Man in Christ',⁴³ spells this out admirably:

⁴¹See Mascall, *Theology and the Gospel of Christ*, p. 175.

⁴²See Mascall's allusions to the influence of Bouyer on Tresmontant in *Theology and the Gospel of Christ*, p. 140.

⁴³See Mascall, *The Importance of Being Human*, pp. 91–108.

[I]n the Christian Church – the Body of Christ – mankind has recovered the unity that it lost in Adam and has indeed been granted a more wonderful and interior unity than it had lost. This is unity far deeper than any visible unity of human association, and it is a unity which can persist even when, as has happened through the sins of Christians, the visible unity of human association has been destroyed; for it is nothing less than a participation in the unity which binds together the Persons of the Holy Trinity, the unity for which the Lord Jesus prayed on the night before his Passion [. . .].⁴⁴

And again, in the same chapter:

To outward view the Church may appear to be merely a rather queer gathering of very miscellaneous men and women, inexplicably preoccupied with old-fashioned ceremonies, strangely excited about apparently irrelevant issues, and patently failing to live the cause of the ideals of human life in which they profess to believe. But in its inner reality the Church is the recreated human race, the holy people of God, the divine community in which the Son of God patiently and tenderly draws men and women into his own perfect human nature and offers them to the Father as his members made one with him and clothed with his glory. [. . .] For it is through the sacraments that the Church militant here on earth, that lower fringe of the mystical Body of Christ to which we now belong, is constantly renewed by her glorified Head who has taken his human nature with him into the heavenly realm.⁴⁵

It's notable that, in some of what he was writings about the Church in the Forties and Fifties, he developed still more fully this allusion to the Mystical Body which he has begun to explore in *Christ, the Christian and the Church*, making use of de Lubac's *Catholicisme*.⁴⁶ What is most striking in all of this, though, is the connection we have just been tracing, in which ecclesiology is seen to require a particular kind of Christology that is in turn made possible by a Trinitarian theology – a Trinitarian theology that is wholly congruent with our somewhat baffled and sometimes unclear intuition about the nature of finite reality as a world in which we never quite coincide with what we are. All of that coming together, or indeed, to paraphrase Gregory Dix's famous expression, 'All of that going with you to the altar every morning' . . .

I shall omit, for now, any detailed discussion of Mascall's treatment of Galot's Christology; this would take us into some rather technical areas, but it provides some further illustration of how the significance of Christology – again, as already touched upon in these discussions of Mascall's legacy – is not something separable from or in tension with a metaphysical and ontological scheme, but instead is consistently part of the same exploration of the relations between the finite and the infinite.

⁴⁴Mascall, *The Importance of Being Human*, p. 100.

⁴⁵Mascall, *The Importance of Being Human*, pp. 104–05.

⁴⁶See Mascall, *Christ, the Christian and the Church*, pp. 111–12, 131, 137, 139, 142–43, 145–46, 149, 151, 193, 201.

Moving towards the last section of this survey: what is there *Anglican* about this articulation of a *nouvelle théologie*? As we have heard, he was not somebody who belonged to any obvious 'school' in the Anglican theology of his day; his Anglican and ecclesial institutional status in Oxford and in London did mean that he had a kind of liberty to pick and choose creatively among the theological influences that were swirling around. I want here to highlight a few themes, not unique to Mascal, but deployed by him in a distinctive way as he approaches his own ambitious theological and philosophical agenda. We have noted his refusal of the late scholastic approach to nature and supernature that was being rendered obsolete by the French Catholic thought of the period; but he does so with not only a clear doctrinal or credal perspective but rather more explicit at times than in the work of some neo-Thomists, but with a free and creative use of his own training in the natural sciences, which helps him to elucidate the essentially interactive and relational character of finite reality. If this is how finite reality in general works, it must be the case for human reality. Then there is the powerful stress that he lays on how Christ fulfils the natural vocation of human beings: Christ is a *perfectly natural human being*, and this is axiomatic for Mascal's argument. Jesus Christ is neither a cardinal instance of merely human excellence, nor simply an irruption from on high. Christ expresses the fundamental openness to the life of the everlasting Word that is already always encoded in our very humanity as images of God. And all of this leads into the ecclesial anthropology of communion and relation that he develops so fully, and which he applies creatively to the issue of the relation between humans and their material environment.

Mascal is distinctive in his clear insistence that this Thomist 'existentialism' he speaks of is a necessary grounding for all this theological construction; that the strong doctrine of the infinite *esse* animating the finite is something of genuine doctrinal significance and indeed urges us towards thinking about doctrine. But it is worth highlighting the somewhat unexpected clarity with which he outlines this theme of the connection between his theological vision of the human and of nature and his remarkably prescient concern about human beings' relation to an increasingly vulnerable and abused material environment. He can write, towards the end of *Existence and Analogy*:

If the radically analogical character of the act of existing is fully understood, we shall be able, without falling into the fallacy of personifying the lower creation, to recognize sub-human creatures, whether animate or inanimate, as partners with us in the activity of existing and as combining with us in the hierarchical order of the universe to praise and glorify God. And while recognizing that in this hierarchical order the lower creatures are subordinated to us for our welfare and can indeed achieve their own perfection only in ministering to it, we shall be warned against that ruthless exploitation of them which has been so calamitous a feature of the modern world and which, in the last resort, derives from the refusal to admit that they in their mode, as we in ours, are stamped with an inherent and inalienable dignity as fellow creatures of the same God.⁴⁷

⁴⁷Mascal, *Existence and Analogy*, pp. 183–84.

This is quite strong meat for 1948, paving the way for a robust theology of human engagement with the material order; it challenges a false and two-dimensional picture of human domination in creation, it recognizes the damage done to material creation by human selfishness and the false perspectives that this generates. It is connected with some of the discussions that Catholic Anglicans of the period had begun to outline (T.S.Eliot's famous essay on Christian society has some comparable thoughts), and it seems fair to posit this as not only a distinctive element in Mascall's work, but one that reflects some distinctively Anglican interests. There would be some value in looking further at de Lubac's interest in Teilhard de Chardin (not a favourite of Mascall's, it must be said) to see how far de Lubac's broader anthropological concerns shaped his response to his fellow-Jesuit's speculative thinking about the human and its material and evolutionary context. More generally, it is of course true that the connection between Thomist existentialism and a particular kind of Christology and ecclesiology is not absent from the *nouvelle théologie* world; there is a very interesting essay by de Lubac, 'Sur la Philosophie chrétienne',⁴⁸ in which he makes something of this point, but I have not found any references in Mascall to this particular essay (it was not published in English translation until the early 1990s,⁴⁹ and I do not know whether Mascall ever saw the French original), but it is one of the rather few places where *nouvelle théologie* writers specifically say that they need something of a Thomist structure to get their doctrinal perspectives off the ground. It is also worth noting that, as with de Lubac, there is a generally implicit, and sometimes explicit, socio-political dimension in Mascall's account of the human and its vocation; we have heard in our discussions something about Mascall's perhaps unexpectedly radical commitments in social and political theology, an area which certainly deserves further exploration.

Mascall is a great deal more than simply a derivative thinker who reheats the shepherd's pie of Gilson and Maritain for Anglophone academic consumption. He continues throughout his career to read and respond to the very complex tensions and trends in the French Catholic intellectual world. Beyond the French sphere, his absorption or digestion of transcendental Thomism, particularly of Rahner's thinking, deserves a far longer treatment; but while it is a significant element in his intellectual evolution, I don't think it is a radical break; nor (to be candid) do I think it the strongest part of his work overall, compared with his absorption of the French material. Mascall is one of a rather small number of people in the UK who is seriously working with non-English, non-Anglophone and non-Anglican thought in the mid-twentieth century. Austin Farrer is, of course, at work at the same time, re-creating a broadly Thomist framework for thinking about religious philosophy. But his own evolution led him further from the Thomist world and vocabulary, towards a more radically will-centred metaphysic. One of the perennial problems with Farrer is, notoriously, his near-allergy to footnotes, which means that we have little evidence of the detail of where his arguments draw upon other writers. It is one element in Farrer's greatness – and one of his most exasperating features as well. But

⁴⁸de Lubac, Henri, 'Sur la philosophie chrétienne', *Nouvelle Revue théologique* 63.3 (March 1936), pp. 225–253.

⁴⁹de Lubac, Henri, 'On Christian Philosophy', trsl. Sharon Mollerus and Susan Clements, *Communio: International Catholic Review* 19.3 (Fall 1992), pp. 478–506.

it is fair to say that, while Mascall acknowledged his deep debt to Farrer in many matters, that debt did not include any steering towards de Lubac. I find little, if any, evidence that Farrer himself was particularly interested in the *nouvelle théologie*; and he is a good deal more ‘occasional’ and sporadic in the explicit connections he makes in his longer works between Christology, sacramental theology and his fundamental metaphysic, although it is perfectly clear that such connections are intrinsic to his thought. It is an interesting and tantalizing difference between him and Mascall. I have mentioned incidentally in passing a couple of passages where Mascall is mildly but firmly critical of Farrer, but I don’t think there is any evidence of the reverse. It remains a relationship calling for further research.

Another point worth mentioning about Mascall’s Anglican context, though again one that would need far more space than we have here, is his consistent involvement with the Orthodox world, as part of an influential current in Anglican practice in the twentieth century, most prominently in the work of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, at whose annual conferences Mascall was a regular speaker. From the works of the early 1940s onwards, he is actively engaging with Vladimir Lossky⁵⁰; later on, we find him tackling themes and ideas coming from Georges Florovsky, Paul Evdokimov,⁵¹ Jean Meyendorff and other writers rooted in the émigré community in Paris.⁵² He is consistently interested in presenting the putative Orthodox reader a model of Western Catholic theological integrity that does not tie itself up in the knots that Orthodox theology often sees in the West. This throws light on the strong emphasis he lays on the pervasiveness of grace, and on the stress on the uncreated nature of grace in many, especially later, works. The little book on *Grace and Glory*,⁵³ already mentioned, and a small gem of exposition, is one where he explores this with care and pushes back against the rather glib Orthodox accusation that all Western theologians (certainly all Western Catholic theologians) assume a rather impersonal or mechanical view of grace as a ‘thing’ that God makes so that it may be given to us to make us better. Mascall, absolutely rightly, shows how little this reflects St Thomas’s authentic voice, and points out all the ways in which the Angelic Doctor repudiates any such teaching.⁵⁴

One final note on Mascall’s sources that should be underlined: he is very ready to turn to members of his own Communion for support and illumination in his arguments, though he does not hold back from criticism. He refers briefly, positively, but not uncritically, to F.D. Maurice in *Theology and the Gospel of Christ*⁵⁵; and in *Christ, the Christian and the Church*, he makes excellent use of the obscure but fertile theological work of the nineteenth-century Robert Wilberforce.⁵⁶ The writings of Fr Lionel Thornton of the Mirfield community are referenced more than once, and used to very good and extensive effect in *The Importance of Being Human*,⁵⁷ though with significant critique appended. Mascall is by no means

⁵⁰See, for example, *Existence and Analogy*, pp. 148–54.

⁵¹See, for example, Mascall, *Nature and Supernature*, pp. 45–47.

⁵²See, for example, Mascall, *Theology and the Gospel of Christ*, pp. 197–202.

⁵³Mascall, E. L., *Grace and Glory* (London: The Faith Press, 1961).

⁵⁴See, in particular, Chapter 4 (‘We shall love’) in Mascall, *Grace and Glory*, pp. 45–62.

⁵⁵See Mascall, *Theology and the Gospel of Christ*, pp. xiii–xv, 5–6, 211.

⁵⁶See Mascall, *Christ, the Christian and the Church*, pp. viii, 51, 92, 174, 177–78, 189, 194, 198–99.

⁵⁷See Mascall, *The Importance of Being Human*, pp. 28, 96–97.

someone who adopts a set of theological solutions from another ecclesial family, importing them without any duty being paid at Customs. He looks into his own intellectual and spiritual theological legacy and finds there the writers, the arguments and the visions that resonate. Indeed, it is possible, I believe to see Mascall as essentially closer to some of these other Anglican figures than he is, for example, to Rahner, despite the generous treatment of Rahner in *The Openness of Being*.⁵⁸

In sum, Mascall as the author of an ‘Anglican *nouvelle théologie*’ is Mascall as the philosopher who knows that his philosophy is generative for his theology and vice versa. He does not explicitly mention the great debates going on in France in the 1930s between some of Maritain’s circle and the pupils of Blondel about the possibility of a Christian philosophy (de Lubac’s essay, mentioned above, belongs in this debate). But I think he would have sidestepped the simple binary that this French controversy rather took for granted, the binary between a philosophy that could get on perfectly well without theology, and a theology that cannibalizes philosophy. Mascall turns away from both, in the name of working for a living, critical, creative relationship between metaphysics and theology; he is very clear that there are some kinds of metaphysics that will not allow a theology to develop, just as much as there are some kinds of theology that won’t allow a metaphysic to develop. And he knows that both outcomes impoverish the Christian mind and imagination. In his consistent affirmation of the unity and distinction of finite activation and infinite actualization, he finds a unifying principle that holds together philosophy, Christology, ecclesiology, sacramental practice, and contemplative discipline; and his own life as disciple, priest and teacher showed memorably what it might be like to hold all this together in a life of prayerful, self-deprecating, generous witness.

⁵⁸See Mascall’s repeated references to Rahner in *The Openness of Being*, especially pp. 67–74, 233–40 and 244–45; see also pp. 13, 28, 46, 48, 100–01, 132, 144, 152, 172, 181, 196.