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Gustave Thils' *Théologie des réalités terrestres* (1947) in Dialogue with the French Thinkers Marrou, Maritain and de Montcheuil: Louvain Theology at the Crossroads of Christianity and Culture

In 1946, the Louvain historian Roger Aubert pleaded for a 'theology of the temporal' which would take into account concrete reality: "Il ne faut pas mépriser la nature, il faut continuer à élaborer, et le plus rapidement possible, une "théologie du temporel"[...] Il faut repenser dans la lumière du Christ le traité de l'anthropologie chrétienne, dont la refonte sera peut-être l'œuvre majeure du milieu du XX^e siècle."¹ Gustave Thils, colleague and theologian, wholeheartedly responded one year later with his *Théologie des réalités terrestres: I. Préludes*.² A second volume, *Théologie de l'histoire*, was published three years later. In 1952 a third book, *Théologie et réalité sociale*,³ was added in which socio-political institutes were described theologically. Several theologians considered Thils' works as Louvain's most important contribution to preconiliar theology. In his widespread and well received standard study, Rosino Gibellini stated that "con il fiuto che sa cogliere i temi che sono nell'aria e con la prontezza a proporre una prima sistemazione per dare un orientamento all'azione, il teologo belga affrontava il tema del rapporto tra vangelo e mondo, che riteneva ormai mature sia sotto il profilo culturale, che sotto il profilo teologico."⁴ James Connolly was also convinced that this theological approach had an impact on and strengthened an adequate incorporation of both theological and philosophical insights into a systematic theology of the temporal.⁵ However, it is remarkable that the interest in Thils' life and theology 'ad intra' overshadowed his ability to incorporate all previous reflections of major intellectuals into his own consistent theology.⁶ This

¹ R. Aubert, *Les grandes tendances théologiques entre les deux guerres*, in «Collectanea Mechliniensia», 16 (1946), 36.

² G. Thils, *Théologie des réalités terrestres. I. Préludes*, Bruges – Paris 1947; G. Thils, *Théologie des réalités terrestres. II. Théologie de l'histoire*, Bruges – Paris 1949.

³ G. Thils, *Théologie et réalité sociale*, Tournai – Paris 1952.

⁴ R. Gibellini, *La teologia del XX secolo*, (Biblioteca di Teologia Contemporanea, 69) Brescia 1992, 282.

⁵ J. Connolly (*Human History and the World of God. The Christian Meaning of History in Contemporary Thought*, New-York – London 1965, 167) expresses it as follows: "The distinguished dogmatic theologian Gustave Thils, professor at the University of Louvain, has produced one of the most fundamental and articulate presentations of a theology of history ever written by a contemporary Catholic theologian".

⁶ Concerning his life, see: E. Brito, *Le professeur émérite Gustave Thils*, in *Index Generalis 1982-1997*, éd. par G. Van Belle, (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 134) Leuven 1999, 35-41; J. Famerée, *L'œuvre théologique de Mgr G. Thils (1909-2000)*, in «Revue Théologique de Louvain», 31 (2000), 474-491; C. Focant, *Hommage à Mgr Thils*, in «Revue Théologique de Louvain», 31 (2000), 467-473; R. Aubert, *La carrière théologique de Mgr Thils*, in *Voies vers l'unité*, (FS Gustave Thils) Louvain-la-Neuve 1981, 7-27; G. Harpigny, *Interview de Monseigneur Gustave Thils*, in «La Foi et le Temps», 18 (1988), 231-258. Concerning his theology 'ad intra', see: G. Pasquale, *Gustave Thils. Promotor of a Catholic Historia Salutis*, in «Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses», 78 (2002), 161-178; P. De Mey,



paper will therefore represent a response to Karim Schelkens' claim on the Louvain faculty that "the involvement of both exegetes, dogmaticians and church historians in the rise of a positive theology on the eve of Vatican II requires further study."⁷ Indeed, Thils was familiar with authoritative voices such as Henri-Irénée Marrou, Jacques Maritain, and Yves de Montcheuil, all influential in the discussion under consideration, and made their insights fruitful through his theological reflection on the relation between Christianity and 'the-world-outside-the-Church'. His groundbreaking contribution to the theology of the temporal met with resistance but would find its way into the Second Vatican Council's documents, and was further developed in the years that followed. In sum, this study will address Thils' particular position on the theological value of the temporal, in particular the theological significance of society, as developed in the middle of the last century in dialogue with the historian Marrou, the philosopher Maritain, and the theologian de Montcheuil.

1. *Restoring Christianity – Saving the World*

Instaurare Omnia in Christo was the clear ambition of the Catholic Church in the first half of the twentieth century. Moreover, through practical movements, such as Catholic Action or the *Mission de France*, the Church was willing to accept the challenge as posed by temporal culture. The world in which people lived could hardly be described as Christian, as was already observed by Marrou,

Gustave Thils and ecumenism at Vatican II, in *The Belgian contribution to the Second Vatican Council. International Research Conference at Mechelen, Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve (September 12-16, 2005)*, ed. by D. Donnelly, J. Famerée, M. Lamberigts and K. Schelkens, Leuven 2008, 389-413; J. Famerée, *Gustave Thils et le De Ecclesia. Un début d'enquête*, in *The Belgian contribution to the Second Vatican Council*, cit., 563-604; F. Purwanto, *L'ecclésiologie dans l'œuvre de Gustave Thils* (unpublished doctoral dissertation) Louvain-la-Neuve 2006.

⁷ K. Schelkens, *The Louvain Faculty of Theology. The Modern(ist) Heritage. Reconciling History and Theology*, in «Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique», 104 (2008), 889.

Maritain, and de Montcheuil, yet they attempted to discern its theological significance and thus give new impulses to its transformation.

1.1. *Henri-Irénée Marrou's Foundations of a Christian Culture*

In 1934, Henri-Irénée Marrou⁸ published the book *Fondements d'une culture chrétienne*.⁹ This book, a cornerstone for his later work,¹⁰ envisaged three goals: describing the state of contemporary culture, constructing an ideal of a *civilisation saine* and explaining how this could be realized.¹¹ Marrou was of the opinion that different areas of contemporary culture were characterized by crisis.¹² Its cause was to be found in the ideal of permanent progress, resulting in people's break from their true nature.¹³ Marrou was not only an excellent historian, but under his pseudonym of Henri Davenson he also proved to be an engaged participant in concrete life as such, severely criticizing currents in contemporary life, searching for a new view on the ideal society and rendering the means to achieve this *civilisation saine*. In Laloy's view this was a "Cet ensemble déconcertant de techniques (on pourrait dire de "systèmes"), organisé, animé par [...] une métaphysique, une vérité."¹⁴ Only this grounding in metaphysical truth could bring about unity in the midst of the diversity of the world, and thus create a healthy society.¹⁵ To install this metaphysical truth a twofold action had to be taken. First, charges had to be brought against the absence of Christian truths and values in the surrounding culture, since otherwise

⁸ Henri-Irénée Marrou (1904-1974) was a French historian. His specialisation was early Christianity and especially Augustine. Between 1945 and 1975 he was professor of Early Christianity at the Sorbonne. Besides this historical interest, he was also interested in his contemporary time, as is clearly shown in his *Fondements d'une culture chrétienne*. This work as well as others are published under the pseudonym of Henri Davenson. In 1968 he will publish his *Théologie de l'histoire* in which he searches for theological meaning within history. With regard to Marrou, see: P. Chenaux, *Henri-Irénée Marrou et l'histoire de la crise moderniste*, in *Historiam Perscrutari. Miscellanea di studi offerti al prof. Otorino Pasquato*, éd. par M. Maritano, (Biblioteca di Scienze Religiose, 180) Rome 2002, 425-434; N. Gauthier, *Henri-Irénée Marrou. Humaniste*, in «Rivista di archeologia Cristiana», 53 (1977), 261-265; J. Laloy, *Hommage à Henri Marrou. Critique de la culture*, in «Les Quatre Fleuves», 8 (1978), 113-117; Id., *Les 'valeurs temporelles' dans la pensée d'Henri-Irénée Marrou*, in «Nova et Vetera», 53 (1978), 309-317; C. Pietri, *Henri Marrou. Un chrétien et l'histoire*, in «Les Quatre Fleuves», 8 (1978), 118-128; P. Vallin, *Henri Irénée Marrou. Connaissance historique et théologie de l'histoire*, in «Recherches de sciences religieuses», 67 (1979), 249-254.

⁹ H. Davenson, *Fondements d'une culture chrétienne*, (Cahiers de la nouvelle Journée, 27) Paris 1934.

¹⁰ Esp. the 1968 book of Marrou (*Théologie de l'histoire*, Paris 1968) is interesting with regard to this topic. In this book he will develop a same kind of project as Thils in his *Théologie de l'histoire* in 1949 (cf. *infra*).

¹¹ Marrou (Davenson, *Fondements d'une culture chrétienne*, cit., 11) refers with regard to his plan to Descartes' *Discours de la Méthode*.

¹² We should not forget that Marrou is influenced by the situation of the society after the First World War and the Great Depression of the 1930s.

¹³ Esp. Davenson, *Fondements d'une culture chrétienne*, cit., 14-63.

¹⁴ Laloy, *Hommage à Henri Marrou*, cit., 114.

¹⁵ Esp. Davenson, *Fondements d'une culture chrétienne*, cit., 64-97.

the culture would always remain superficial and non-salutary.¹⁶ Second, it was necessary to point out that only Christianity could provide salvation and humanity should actively participate in this process.¹⁷

Dans la mesure où l'humanité accomplit son destin elle se ramène au Christ, s'accomplit en lui et par lui en Dieu. Dans la même mesure, le monde assumé par l'homme se soumet au Christ. Ainsi la civilisation apparaît dans la perspective chrétienne comme un effort pour conquérir, à travers l'homme, la nature à Dieu, pour l'imprégner de spirituel.¹⁸

In a society characterized by crisis,¹⁹ personal commitment was the pre-condition for a new foundation, which was inspired by a Christian asceticism in search of a connection with its surrounding culture.²⁰ Marrou called especially on intellectuals, artists, and scientists to complete their actions, for all should be “Un médiateur entre la Nature et le Christ, à rassembler l'infinie diversité des phénomènes en un hymne de louange et d'exaltation.”²¹ Not only intellectuals had to realize this but also the laity, or, in Marrou's terms, the contemporary ‘barbarians’,²² must be involved in it. The movement of reconquest could after all only be realized through collective action, for, according to Marrou, a mobilization of the masses was to be expected to contribute to this debate.

¹⁶ Esp. *Ibidem*, 98-105.

¹⁷ Esp. *Ibidem*, 106-115.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 112.

¹⁹ Marrou (*Ibidem*, 119) indicates in the title of the first chapter of the third part of his book that his aim is to “camper dans les ruines”. Pietri (*Henri Marrou*, cit., 119) uses this title to point out his severe cultural criticism.

²⁰ Marrou (Davenson, *Fondements d'une culture chrétienne*, cit., 127) writes: “Je vous invite à vivre sous un climat rude. Vous ne pouvez plus maintenant vivre simplement comme un homme de notre temps; il vous faut lutter pour retrouver la santé qu'il ignore”.

²¹ Davenson, *Fondements d'une culture chrétienne*, cit., 145.

²² Marrou (*Ibidem*, 148) states: “Le problème n'est donc pas de ramener nos barbares à une forme plus ou moins rajeunie de la culture humaniste, mais de les aider à découvrir quoi faire de leur esprit”.

Nous vivons dans un monde épuisé, si malade qu'il ne peut même plus se faire illusion sur son sort. Personne ne sait où aller, mais beaucoup ont conscience de ce qui leur manque. A nous qui savons, de montrer où est le Chemin et le salut.²³

1.2. Jacques Maritain's Integral Approach to Christianity

In 1936, two years after Marrou's publication, Jacques Maritain²⁴ published the book *Humanisme intégral: Problèmes temporels et spirituels d'une nouvelle chrétienté*,²⁵ a similar attempt to develop a 'new Christianity'.²⁶ Maritain aimed at reacting to the modern world by way of envisaging a new integrated Christianity. Indeed, Maritain did not envisaged a mere return to the Middle Ages, but hoped for a substantially renewed incorporation of Christianity into its context. This plea could in a certain way be considered as a settlement with his past as a member of *Action Française*, a French political movement under the leadership of Charles Maurras that, because of its promotion of an intransigent Catholicism, was condemned by Pius XI in 1926.²⁷ The book can be considered as the theoretical basis for Maritain's meetings in *Le Foyer*. An association he founded in order to bring together different areas of society: artists were sitting next to writers, intellectuals and theologians. Reputed thinkers such

²³ Davenson, *Fondements d'une culture chrétienne*, cit., 158.

²⁴ Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) was a French philosopher. Originally Protestant, he converted in 1906 together with his wife Raissa to Catholicism. In 1914 he became professor of modern philosophy at the Institut catholique de Paris. During the Second World War, he became France's ambassador to the Vatican. During his life he taught at Oxford, Yale, Notre Dame, Chicago, Princeton and Toronto. Starting from a Thomist inspiration he reflects on political and social issues. With regard to Maritain, see: L. Aldrich, *The development of Jacques Maritain's epistemology of the natural law*, (unpublished doctoral dissertation) Rome 1993; P. Chenaux, 'Humanisme intégral' (1936) de Jacques Maritain, (Classiques du Christianisme) Paris 2006; G. Cottier, *De Bergson à la philosophie de l'être*, in «Nova et Vetera», 58 (1983), 27-45; J. Daujat, *Maritain. Un maître pour notre temps*, (L'auteur et son message, 4) Paris 1978, 166-207; Y. Floucat, *Maritain ou le catholicisme intégral et l'humanisme démocratique*, (Questions disputées. Saint Thomas et les thomistes) Paris 2003; *The Maritain Factor. Taking Religion into Interwar Modernism*, ed. by R. Heynckx and J. De Maeyer, Leuven 2010; R. McNerny, *Maritain's Intellectual and Spiritual Life. His Major Intuitions*, in *Jacques Maritain. Philosophe dans la cité/A Philosopher in the World*, ed. by J.-L. Allard, (Philosophica, 28) Ottawa 1985, 7-17; G. Prouvost, *Catholicité de l'intelligence métaphysique. La philosophie dans la foi selon Jacques Maritain*, (Croire et Savoir, 15) Paris 1991; C.L. Sweeney, *The Christian Existentialism of Jacques Maritain*, in *Jacques Maritain*, ed. by J.-L. Allard, 31-41.

²⁵ J. Maritain, *Humanisme intégral. Problèmes temporels et spirituels d'une nouvelle chrétienté*, (Bibliothèque philosophique) Paris 1936.

²⁶ Floucat (*Maritain ou le catholicisme intégral et l'humanisme démocratique*, cit., 45) writes "La "nouvelle chrétienté" à élaborer est, selon Maritain, le lieu où peut se déployer, dans l'attraction de l'héroïsme de la sainteté, l'humanisme intégral de la transcendance et de l'Incarnation".

²⁷ *Damnatur Quaedam Opera Caroli Maurras et ephemerides 'L'Action Française'*, (Acta Apostolicae Sedis, 18) Roma 1926, 529-530. The condemnation of this movement is often considered as the end of the hegemony of neothomism in France and the start of other theological methods. Blondel writes (cited in Y. Palau, *La crise de l'Action Française (1926-1929) à travers la correspondance Blondel-Archambault*, Paris 1995, 157): "Le déblaiement de l'A.F., qui déconcerte tant d'esprits, nous ouvre un champ plus libre et plus sûr, plus fécond aussi, puisque les jeunes gens que se trouvaient dans des fausses doctrines et dans un état d'esprit qu'on peut dire mauvais et stérilisant, vont avoir à chercher des explications et des directions telles que celles que vous pouvez leur fournir".



as Léon Bloy, Louis Massignon, Humbert Clérissac, and Henri Massis were part of these exchanges. Maritain clearly searched for a method to enrich theology and philosophy through concrete reality and culture. His method, which was inspired by neothomism and the evolution philosophy of Bergson, could be considered Christian dialectical realism,²⁸ which wanted to grasp truth and discover the ‘real’ in surrounding phenomena. In Maritain’s view only a true Christian philosophy would be able to transcend the traps of relativism and materialism. In addition, it presented a specific ideal of Christian society. He shared Nikolai Berdiaev’s hope for a *nouveau moyen âge*,²⁹ (naively) considering that time as uniformly Christian. He thus appreciated the temporal realm in its relative value while underlining that the ultimate goal always remained eternal life.³⁰ According to Maritain, the Middle Ages were exactly characterized by this orientation towards eternity, the sacred, and the sanctified. It was therefore regrettable that this theocentric orientation was contradicted by the rediscovery of anthropocentric humanism³¹ which was propagated by socialism and Marxism.³² Maritain maintained that humanism needed completion by the theocentric in order to be fruitful. His view of the world was constructed similarly: the world is the kingdom of man, of God, and of the devil. Consequently, history could be summarized as man’s rejection of the devil and his will to realize the Kingdom of God. This approach had two consequences. On the one hand, the world was sanctified because it was incorporated in the universal work of the incarnation. On the other hand, the world was formed in

²⁸ See S. Schloesser, *The Rise of a Mystic Modernism. Maritain and the Sacrificed Generation of the Twenties*, in *The Maritain Factor*, cit., 34.

²⁹ N.A. Berdiaev, *Un nouveau moyen âge. Réflexions sur les destinées de la Russie et de l’Europe*, (Le Roseau d’Or, 13) Paris 1927.

³⁰ Esp. J. Maritain, *Religion et culture*, (Questions disputées, 1) Paris 1930; Id., *Du régime temporel et de la liberté*, (Questions disputées, 11) Paris 1933.

³¹ This anthropocentric humanism has its origin in the Renaissance and Reformation according to Maritain and is now being revalorised. Chenaux (*‘Humanisme intégral’*, cit., 49) describes it as follows: “liberté sans grâce” and “Âge d’humanisme séparé de l’Incarnation”.

³² With his rejection of both tendencies he joins Berdiaev.

service of man's life and his task to realize temporal goals. This philosophical worldview with its transformative character also had consequences for the historical society and could, therefore, be described as a practical philosophy.³³ It was a 'communal and personal philosophy' that drew attention to the social, political and economic dimensions of life.³⁴ However, the constant goal of realizing the common good in light of the Ultimate Good could be fulfilled in a diversified way.³⁵ Therefore the society Maritain was thinking of should be characterized as a synthesis of sacred and secular elements in one Christian state.

Le temporel serait subordonné ou infraposé au spirituel, non plus sans doute à titre d'agent instrumental comme il arrivait si souvent au Moyen Age, mais à titre d'*agent principal moins élevé*, non plus selon que le bien commun terrestre serait pris surtout comme simple moyen à l'égard de la vie éternelle, mais selon qu'il serait pris comme ce qu'il est essentiellement à cet égard, c'est-à-dire comme *fin intermédiaire ou infravalente*.³⁶

1.3. Yves de Montcheuil's organic society and Christian life

The third intellectual which we have to mention is Yves de Montcheuil.³⁷ As a member of the 'second school of Lyon',³⁸ he used his knowledge of Maurice Blondel, along with the ideas of Malebranche, to overcome the separation

³³ This reference to a 'practical philosophy' (cf. Blondel's philosophy) was made by Chenaux ('*Humanisme intégral*', cit., 45).

³⁴ Maritain (*Humanisme intégral*, cit., 288) writes: "L'éveil de la conscience chrétienne aux problèmes strictement temporels, sociaux et politiques, impliqués dans l'instauration d'une nouvelle chrétienté entraînera, croyons nous, la naissance de nouvelles formations politiques temporellement et politiquement spécifiées, et d'inspirations intrinsèquement chrétienne".

³⁵ A difference between Maritain and Marrou is noticeable. The former left space for a pluriform society, whereas the latter pleads for a uniform society.

³⁶ Maritain, *Humanisme intégral*, cit., 190.

³⁷ Yves de Montcheuil (1900-1944) is a French Jesuit. In 1917 he joined the Jesuits and was sent to Jersey to complete his education in philosophy. After this he went to the Sorbonne in Paris and followed three years a Ph.D. in Rome on the topic *L'intervention de Malebranche dans la querelle du pur amour*. After having completed this he taught between 1935 and 1944 at the Institut catholique de Paris. During the Second World War he collaborated with "Cahiers du Témoignage Chrétien" and provided spiritual guidance to the youngsters of the movement of resistance *Maquis*. During a visit to this movement in Vercors, he was captured by the German Army and was executed. With regard to de Montcheuil see: Y. de Montcheuil, *Vie chrétienne et action temporelle*, (Les lampes, 7) Paris 1944; É. Fouilloux, *Yves de Montcheuil. Philosophe et théologien Jésuite (1900-1944)*, Paris 1995; D. Grumett, *Yves de Montcheuil. Action, Justice, and the Kingdom in Spiritual Resistance to Nazism*, in «Theological Studies», 68 (2007), 618-641; B. Sesboué, *Yves de Montcheuil (1900-1944). Précurseur en théologie*, (Cogitatio Fidei, 255) Paris 2006.

³⁸ Esp. É. Fouilloux, *La seconde 'École de Lyon' (1919-1939)*, in *Maurice Blondel et la philosophie française*, éd. par E. Gabellieri and P. de Cointet, Langres – Saints-Geosmes 2007, 263-273; P. Henrici, *La descendance blondélienne parmi les jésuites français*, in *Maurice Blondel et la philosophie française*, cit., 305-322. After the crisis of modernism a new interest in Maurice Blondel arises in Lyon on the one hand at the *studium* of the Jesuits and on the other hand at the Institut Catholique de Lyon. The brothers Auguste and Albert Valensin were at the basis of this revaluation. They introduced his thinking to their confreres Victor Fontoynt and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who in their turn are the mentors of Henri de Lubac, Gaston Fessard, Henri Bouillard and Yves de Montcheuil.



between nature and the supernatural.³⁹ This led him to affirm the theological character of human action and thus the active involvement of the faithful in social life. Even de Montcheuil's life testified to this: German soldiers killed him in 1944 because of his involvement in the Resistance. The Church was, according to him, at the service of all different realms of the world: the familial, economical, national and international. In his work de Montcheuil developed an organic theology of society, which can best be described as 'vitalism'.⁴⁰ He claimed that society includes two parts: material and moral. The task of man is to shape the material part of society by influencing the moral part. In *Vie chrétienne et action temporelle*,⁴¹ published in 1944, this theory was discussed at length. Here he considered this constant process of human beings' active involvement as a logical consequence of the fact that Christianity had to be incarnated in the world. However, the spiritual aspect remained unchangeable: the world was transformed in a process of divinization.⁴² The ultimate goal was the incarnation of Christianity in the whole world, which should strive for communion with God. Therefore, religious life had to be understood in close connection with temporal life, since both of them were in an essential relation. This harmony was not only central in one's personal life, but also within the whole human community - economic, political, social and temporal - since the supernatural should be reflected everywhere. Thus, Christians must not only aim at removing their personal sins, but also social sins had to be dealt with. Being a Christian always had a societal component. In the meantime, it should be clear that Christianity is not merely concerned with temporal action, e.g. creating stability or social justice, but was more an attempt to let the eternal nourish the temporal. This was,

³⁹ As such it can be considered as a same kind of project as was developed in H. de Lubac, *Surnaturel. Études historiques*, (Théologie, 8) Paris 1946.

⁴⁰ G. Weigel, *The Historical Background of the Encyclical Humani Generis*, in «Theological Studies», 12 (1951), 217.

⁴¹ De Montcheuil, *Vie chrétienne et action temporelle*, cit..

⁴² De Montcheuil (*Vie chrétienne et action temporelle*, cit., 5) writes "le surnaturel doit pénétrer tout le temporel sans s'y altérer".

however, never fully accessible according to de Montcheuil, since Christians did not have complete freedom with regards to a given situation. Therefore, when the laity took up their responsibility, they should, under the guidance of the hierarchy, aim for a better future. This moral and apostolic action was necessary to bring contemporaries into the full Christian life.

Nous ne sommes pas, on le voit, entrés dans le détail des tâches qui s'imposeront à nous demain. Peut-être est-il difficile de les prévoir avec précision. Quelles qu'elles soient, il serait impossible d'y faire face si les catholiques de France n'avaient une idée claire des rapports du christianisme et de l'ordre temporel, de la part d'initiative réservée aux laïcs sous leur propre responsabilité, enfin l'extension de l'action qui vise à christianiser le monde. C'est pourquoi il nous a paru opportun d'aborder nettement ces problèmes pour y faire réfléchir dès maintenant les apôtres qui se forment dans l'Action catholique.⁴³

2. *Gustave Thils: The Universal and Temporal Scope of Theology*

In 1947 the Louvain theologian Gustave Thils,⁴⁴ published the book *Théologie des réalités terrestres. I. Préludes*, in which he gave a first reflection on a 'theology of the temporal', which could be considered as "Une vraie théologie dogmatique de la réalité terrestre, ou si l'on veut, une étude poussée de la signification des valeurs terrestres aux yeux de Dieu."⁴⁵ He wanted to reflect on the role of the temporal in the plan of salvation and the way in which the Word was incarnated. The book presented both a method of doing theology and a practical application of it: *une théologie à faire*. Additionally, it was also an implicit theological reflection on theology as a discipline. Starting from the contemporary interest in the temporal realm, Thils noticed the opportunity for Catholic theology to overcome the regnant duality, if not separation, between

⁴³ *Ibidem*, 35.

⁴⁴ Gustave Thils (1909-2000) was born in Etterbeek-Brussels. After his studies of philosophy at the minor seminary of Malines from 1926 until 1928, he started his theology education at the major seminary, where he graduated in 1931. On 26 December 1931 he was ordained. Between 1931 and 1935 he wrote his dissertation in Louvain, where he was a student of the historian René Draguet. After obtaining his Magister degree in 1937 he became a professor at the major seminary, teaching *la petite morale*. Two years later he became professor of Sacred Scripture and taught this course for eight years. As spiritual director of the seminarians he developed a specific spirituality for secular clergy. On the second of October 1946 he became an honorary canon at the chapter of Malines. In 1947 he published the first volume of the *Théologie des réalités terrestres*, two years later the second volume. 1947 was also the year in which he took possession of the chair of fundamental theology at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Louvain. As member of the Secretariat for the Christian Unity since 1961 Thils took active part in the Second Vatican Council, where he helped the 'squadra belgica' with their work on *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*. His major contribution should however been found in *Unitatis redintegratio*.

⁴⁵ Thils, *Théologie des réalités terrestres. I*, cit., 13.



God and culture. The description of the metaphysical foundations of the temporal, using a *théologie des réalités terrestres*, would lead to a transformation and completion of the temporal realm. Based upon the premise that the discipline had a universal scope, theology would be able to present the ontological nature of every reality, evaluate it in light of revelation, according to the axis of ‘spirit’ and ‘flesh’, and help to ‘spiritualize’ these profane realities. After Thils illustrated how a *ressourcement* of both Scripture and Medieval theology (esp. Thomas Aquinas) supported his vision of a harmony between eternal and temporal values, he applied this ‘new’ theology to five practical topics, namely society, culture, technique, art, and work. It is important to note that Thils mainly aimed here at objects or realities which were an external expression of man. Thus he wanted to give a holistic portrayal of humankind.

This first volume laid the foundation for *Théologie des réalités terrestres*. II. *Théologie de l’histoire*, in which Thils took a position regarding ‘theology of history’, a recent current of thought. This current would flourish in the 1940s and 1950s and had two specific emphases. First, there were theologians who, by emphasising the eschaton, focused mainly on existence after this present world (Louis Bouyer, Henri Féret, Jean Daniélou). By doing so, they had the tendency to seemingly disregard the world in its actual existence. Other theologians (Marie-Dominique Chenu, Léopold Malevez) put the incarnation of Christ, as a deification of the natural realm, as the first matter of importance, which underlined the high value of the present reality for theology. Although they both used an inductive method, they differed radically concerning their appraisal of the present world and concrete reality.⁴⁶ Thils belonged more to this second tendency.

⁴⁶ Regarding the representatives Gibellini (*La teologia del XX secolo*, cit., 306-307) writes: “Bouyer et Daniélou, d’un côté, Thils et Malevez, de l’autre, furent les représentants les plus connus et les plus cités des deux positions opposées, l’eschatologisme et l’incarnationisme, dans la théologie catholique de langue française de l’après-guerre”. For more information on this topic see: R. Aubert, *Discussions récentes autour de la théologie de l’histoire*, in «Collectanea Mechliniensa», 33 (1948), 129-149; J. Connolly, *The Voices*

Mis en présence d'une humanité en marche et de civilisations en pleine évolution, des fidèles et des incroyants se sont demandé si ce mouvement d'ordre temporel avait un sens pour le Christ et pour la révélation chrétienne. Un sens, c'est-à-dire, à la fois, une valeur et une direction.⁴⁷

Thils claimed history had indeed its own meaning in light of salvation and thus Christian theologians were charged with the task of interpreting and bringing it to its realization by relating and evaluating it in dialogue with the deposit of faith: theologians should help humanity on its temporal journey in the history of salvation. Its progressive sense was an optimistic presumption. Based upon the idea of incarnation, and thus theological hope, temporal action was promoted and its results were considered as fruits of the Holy Spirit and preparing for the Biblical 'new Jerusalem'. Crucial in this development was again the idea that profane history had to be 'spiritualized', in contrast to being touched by the 'flesh'.

Whereas, in this second volume, the individual believer was responsible for the progress of history, this approach was completed with a 'third'⁴⁸ volume, *Théologie et réalité sociale*, in which Thils developed a 'theology of society'. Applying the method he developed in the first volume, he illustrated how societies, as created beings, had the goal of glorifying God and serving humanity. Due to man's failure, societies were corrupted with disorder and a social redemption was necessary and initiated by God. This process involved, however, an ongoing history in which the individual believer could take part.

3. *Transcending Theological Lines*

One of Thils' primary merits was the development of a unique line of theology of the temporal, and while it was clearly based upon the thought of

of France. A Survey of Contemporary Theology in France, New York 1961; Connolly, *Human History and the World of God*, cit.; P. Henry, *Note. The Christian Philosophy of History*, in «Theological Studies», 13 (1952), 419-432; L. Malevez, *Deux théologies catholiques de l'histoire*, in «Bijdragen. Tijdschrift voor Philosophie en Theologie», 10 (1949), 225-240; P.D. Optatus, *Theologie der geschiedenis in het verleden en het heden*, in «Katholiek archief», 8 (1953), 265-312.

⁴⁷ Thils, *Théologie des réalités terrestres. II*, cit., 7.

⁴⁸ However this last book not seemed to be a third volume, i.e. it was not called *Théologie des réalités terrestres. III*, Thils nevertheless considered it as the last part of a trilogy, as was indicated in G. Thils, *La Bible et les communautés humaines*, in *La Bible et le prêtre*, éd. par L. Cerfaux, (Etudes de pastorale, 5) Louvain 1951, n. 1.

influential precursors, their ideas were transcended in a congruent synthesis in dialogue with a new, post-war, context. This was expressed the clearest in Thils' elaboration of the four interlinked themes of the theological significance of temporal realities, the integral value of society, the ideal of historical transformation, and the importance of the laity.

First, Thils developed in his *Préludes* a clear position according to which temporal realities have a Christian significance. This was mainly based on the idea of incarnation and the universal salvific will of God. Consequently, his method was inductive by nature because it considered the temporal as the object in which traces – if not the whole of – revelation could be found and realized. Moreover, Thils believed in man's capacity to transform – although always under influence of sin – and fulfill reality according to God's will. Furthermore, he considered this as an active participation in the work of the Trinity. This acknowledgment of the Christian significance of earthly realities was clearly inspired by the thought of Maritain, Marrou, and de Montcheuil, as was indicated by numerous references.⁴⁹ It was indeed Maritain, and in particular his idea of an integration of eternal and temporal values, who contributed to Thils' envisaged project to overcome the present-day duality. Thils described his project, too, with the following rhetorical question:⁵⁰

Pourquoi ne point assurer la réintégration de ces valeurs profanes dans une perspective chrétienne, grâce à la diffusion et à l'incarnation institutionnelle d'une pensée unitaire, c'est-à-dire d'une conception totale de la vie et du monde selon le Christ ?⁵¹

Likewise, Maritain's thought was also inspirational for the differentiation between 'spiritual' and 'fleshly' earthly realities, since he distinguished between 'rich' and 'poor' instruments to realize the Christian order in the temporal world. It is nevertheless true that Thils, while recapturing the underlying idea, but renaming the concepts, tried to enrich them in a twofold manner. On the one hand, his 'renaming' brought the concepts more in line with the 'style' of the

⁴⁹ E.g. the explicit references to Maritain and Davenson in Thils, *Théologie des réalités terrestres. I*, cit., 48.

⁵⁰ Cf. Thils, *Théologie des réalités terrestres. I*, cit., 21; 51.

⁵¹ Thils, *Théologie des réalités terrestres. I*, cit., 21.

Biblical renewal as part of the *ressourcement*-movement.⁵² On the other hand, by describing certain realities by using the concept ‘fleshly’ instead of ‘poor’, Thils emphasized the general idea that profane realities, as part of creation, should not by definition be understood as impure. The value of created realities was inherently good, and Thils’ use of more dynamic concepts pointed out that man had the ability to induce them with a positive or negative orientation with regard to eternity.⁵³ It is clear that Thils’ ‘incarnational’ position bore witness to a certain optimism towards temporal realities. Theologians such as Jean Daniélou, even considered him as expressing “un optimisme un peu excessif”,⁵⁴ and his inspiration Marrou would reproach him later for being “pas assez eschatologique.”⁵⁵ The reaction of the latter was indeed more in line with his more pessimistic view on culture, which was, according to him, characterized by crisis, only surmountable with a re-establishment of Christianity. Nevertheless, it was indeed true that Thils’ incarnational thinking led him to consider temporal realities sometimes as the objects-of-focus instead of his initial interest to consider them as externalizations of man. This even brought him in his later work to nuance his own position and to depict it rather as an *anthropologie chrétienne intégrale*, instead of a *théologie des réalités terrestres*.⁵⁶

The thought of the three authorities is, nevertheless, most noticeable in Thils’ elaboration on (the ideal) society. As Thils explained with the thought of de Montcheuil, society illustrated most clearly how the transcendent, like the Word incarnate, integrated the natural realm.⁵⁷ This was also in line with Marrou’s insistence on the absorption of culture in the Christian order or economy of salvation, which Thils liked to point out.⁵⁸ This would lead, according to Thils, to an integral Christian society, a concept he borrowed then again from Maritain, which was the ideal of a socio-temporal realization of the

⁵² Esp. Thils, *Théologie et réalité sociale*, cit., 64.

⁵³ Cf. Thils, *Théologie des réalités terrestres. I*, cit., 58-59; Thils, *Théologie et réalité sociale*, cit., 283. Thils not only refers in this regard to *Humanisme intégral*, but also to Maritain’s *du régime temporel et de la liberté*.

⁵⁴ J. Daniélou, *Review of Gustave Thils. Théologie des réalités terrestres. I. Préludes*, in «Études», 255 (1947), 135. There can also be found a second, less severe, review: M. Flick, *Review of G. Thils. Théologie des réalités terrestres. I. Préludes. II. Théologie de l’histoire*, in «Gregorianum», 52 (1951), 603-604.

⁵⁵ H.-I. Marrou, *Carnets posthumes*, éd. par F. Marrou-Flamant, Paris 2006, 436.

⁵⁶ Thils (*Orientations de la théologie*, Leuven 1958, 121) writes “On a peut-être eu tort de parler de Théologie des réalités terrestres, car [...] en dernière analyse, il s’agit [simplement] d’une Anthropologie chrétienne, mais *intégrale* [...]. Si notre anthropologie théologique avait été intégrale, il n’aurait jamais été question de théologie des réalités terrestres”.

⁵⁷ Esp. Thils (*Théologie des réalités terrestres. I*, cit., 9) with clear reference to de Montcheuil’s *Vie chrétienne et action temporelle*: “Elle veut descendre jusqu’aux plus humbles sociétés et leur communiquer quelque chose de sa supériorité de nature, un peu comme le Verbe, en s’incarnant a assumé une nature humaine et a agi en homme, sans rien perdre de son autonomie divine radicale et de la transcendance qu’il possède toujours en tant que seconde Personne de la sainte Trinité”.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, 14.



Biblical and revealed truths.⁵⁹ Thus, the danger of a ‘Satanocracy’, again one of Maritain’s concepts, could be avoided and the true Christian values, already present in society, could be restored.⁶⁰ What would result is an integrated Christian society. It is striking that all the authors referred in this regard to the theocentric ideal of the Middle Ages. Here we like to question if they have not been too naïve in their view on the Middle Ages as the ‘good old days’ of Christianity.⁶¹ In our opinion their presentation of this ideal Christianity was also influenced by their fear of communist Marxism, and their harmonious model of society could be seen as a counterweight. In this context, it is remarkable that Thils in a certain way also developed a materialist line of thought. Nevertheless, his materialism would never function on its own, but would always make the link with revelation and the underlying metaphysical/ontological ideas. It is, however, important to point out that Thils insisted on Maritain’s remarks, that in this theocratic society Christianity should not be merely decorative, as in the modern age, but should fully and substantially be integrated into the present time with its developed civilization and values: “unir l’apport de l’époque moderne aux richesses médiévales, dans une nouvelle harmonie: telle sera la chrétienté de l’avenir.”⁶² This is a view that was very much based upon the sources of theology, namely a profound knowledge of the universalistic theology of St. Paul and the theology of St. Thomas. The latter especially challenged Thils to reflect in a systematic manner on the whole of reality and, because of the success of neothomism in the 1940s, he was a great authority when constructing a ‘new’ theology of the temporal. It could be surprising, however, during a time in which

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, 15; 145; Thils, *Théologie et réalité sociale*, cit., 243.

⁶⁰ *Id.*, *Théologie des réalités terrestres. I*, cit., 156; *Id.*, *Théologie et réalité sociale*, cit., 173-174. It is striking that Thils points out the link in Maritain’s work between this Satanocratic description of society and the dialectic theology of Karl Barth.

⁶¹ In this critique I am strengthened by the article of P. Raedts, *De christelijke middeleeuwen als mythe. Ontstaan en gebruik van een constructie uit de negentiende eeuw*, in «*Tijdschrift voor Theologie*», 30 (1990), 146-158. In this article he presents how, one century earlier, the church constructed a story regarding the Middle Ages to unite and mobilise the faithful.

⁶² Thils, *Théologie des réalités terrestres. I*, cit., 20.

the study of patristics saw a revival, that he did not refer to them in this book. Nevertheless, in a previous book, he made his debts to the Church Fathers clear.

Nous plaçons ce qui suit sous le patronage des Pères. Non point que nous comptions reprendre aux meilleurs Docteurs de la chrétienté de nombreuses citations: on n'en trouvera aucune. Mais parce que nous espérons avoir traduit quelque chose de leur esprit.⁶³

The third element in Thils' oeuvre was the process of transformation towards the ideal of a Christian society and world. This idea of a history which progressively moved towards completion with its own significance, transcends, by incorporating both, the thought of Marrou and de Montcheuil. The first, and in particular, in his 1948 lecture in Louvain, seemed to be at the origin of Thils' distinction between a physics of history, philosophy of history, and theology of history.⁶⁴ Thils retained Marrou's idea that history developed towards a more Christian fullness and thus towards a salvation of the visible society. Nevertheless, to describe his appreciation of present-day society, the work *Vie chrétienne et action temporelle* of de Montcheuil, came into Thils' sight⁶⁵ and allowed him to describe it as a decrease of the difference between 'prefiguration' and 'eschaton'. Thus in the present, positive 'Christian' values could already be discerned, and the harmonious relations and unity of the resulting society were clearly prefigured.⁶⁶ However, this optimistic vision needed the strong metaphysical foundation provided by Marrou.⁶⁷ "Se soumettre à la vérité chrétienne, c'est se soumettre à la Personne du Christ, qui est la Vérité par excellence et confirmer dans le monde sa royauté."⁶⁸ Thils not only confronted the thought of Marrou, but also again the ideas of Daniélou, which he considered not completely in accordance with revelation and, because of its depreciation of the created, not pedagogically applicable.⁶⁹

In the process of transformation, the laity had to be addressed and mobilized. Thils indeed described the very strong reciprocity between the metaphysical idea, the temporal realities, and man's involvement. It also transcended the one-sidedness of Marrou (considering the laity as the new

⁶³ Id., *Mission du clergé*, Bruges 1942, 11.

⁶⁴ Cf. Id., *Théologie des réalités terrestres. II*, cit., 18; 28.

⁶⁵ Cf. Id., *Théologie des réalités terrestres. I*, cit., 148.

⁶⁶ Cf. *Ibidem*, 195; Id., *Théologie et réalité sociale*, cit., 37-38; 66.

⁶⁷ Cf. Id., *Théologie des réalités terrestres. I*, cit., 158-160.

⁶⁸ Id., *Théologie des réalités terrestres. I*, cit., 158.

⁶⁹ Cf. Id., *Théologie des réalités terrestres. II*, cit., 44-45. Thils (*Théologie des réalités terrestres. II*, cit., 80) also writes the following: "La réponse du P. Daniélou ne nous semble pas complète. Elle ne rend pas compte de toutes les données de la révélation".



‘barbarians’), Maritain (addressing mainly the intellectuals), and de Montcheuil (calling only upon those wanting to take action) by addressing all faithful. In Thils’ view all individuals should search for the mystery of redemption in everyday life and, therefore, theology could be considered as having the purpose of spiritual formation. This bears a clear resemblance with his book on Christian spirituality *Sainteté chrétienne*⁷⁰ and his constant aim to let people achieve the status of holiness in daily life.⁷¹ Perhaps this is even better summarized in the title and content of his later work, *La Sainteté ‘dans et par le siècle’*.⁷² Nevertheless, Thils remained rather naïve in the possibilities of his theology, since reading the book already presumes a certain theological basis and the step of going from theory to practice is a great one to take. Nevertheless, Thils’ thought was clearly ahead of the Council’s acceptance of a universal call to holiness.⁷³

5. Conclusion

This article discusses the unique contribution of Gustave Thils’ *Théologie des réalités terrestres* and *réalité sociale* in the rising current of theological interest in the temporal and societal realms. Indeed, French thinkers paved the way to his systematic theology from a historical, philosophical, and theological perspective. Each of them shaped one of the elements that Thils dynamically combined in his synthetic theological system. First, Marrou’s project of a *civilisation saine* launched a search for the metaphysical foundation of the temporal realm. Second, Maritain’s concept of an integrated Christianity introduced a clear vision on society and the role of humanity therein. Finally, de

⁷⁰ G. Thils, *Sainteté chrétienne. Précis de théologie ascétique*, Tielt 1958.

⁷¹ In this context we should not forget Thils’ contribution in the Second Vatican Council on the chapter regarding the holiness. Where the original idea was to attribute the needs to attain a state of holiness only to the religious, there was decided to attribute the possibilities to attain the state of holiness to the whole people of God. Thils had a great role in the writing of this chapter.

⁷² G. Thils, *La Sainteté ‘dans et par le siècle’*, Louvain-la-Neuve 1994.

⁷³ T.W. O’Brien, ‘If you wish to be perfect’. *Change and Continuity in Vatican II’s Call to Holiness*, in «The Heythrop Journal», 55 (2014), 286-296.

Montcheuil's view on Christian action implied the transformation of society in a Christian sense. Thils not only combined their ideas, but also transcended them and fruitfully applied them in both theory and practice. His theology may be considered a Christian anthropology through which theologians can systematically reflect upon temporal realities, such as culture and society, taking revelation into account, and human persons can understand the Christian meaning of their daily activities.

As such, by inductively interpreting the temporal and society, associating them with Christian revelation and pleading for its transformation towards its fullness, Thils' theology also held a prophetic value. On the one hand, it bore witness to the incarnated Christian elements discernable in the context of daily life and their value as prefigurations of the coming eschaton. On the other hand, Thils' theology, which was original in its time, was in itself a prefiguration of the ideas and style promulgated by the Second Vatican Council thanks to its optimistic appreciation of the world '*ad extra*'. As such, in present-day society (and theology) – often confronted with cultural pessimism – this theology positively reminds us of the value of the incarnation and of an integrated Christianity, and thus forms a challenge for new cultural theologies in dialogue with their ever – and in Thils' vision, progressively – developing contexts.

Summary:

The present article argues that the Louvain theologian Gustave Thils found the stepping-stones for his 'theology of the temporal' in the works of the prominent French Christian thinkers Henri-Irénée Marrou, Jacques Maritain and Yves de Montcheuil. It first presents the thought of these three authors on the Christian significance of temporal reality, and then discusses how Thils, who was inspired by their view on the relationship between Christianity and temporal realities, attempted to transcend their thought by combining them in a synthetic theological system. As such, in the volumes *Théologie des réalités terrestres* and *Théologie et réalité sociale*, Thils developed a theory to reflect upon earthly realities with a particular focus on revelation, as well as a method that could be applied by the ordinary faithful to contemplate their everyday activities. This all-encompassing approach might be considered the elaboration of a Christian anthropology that aims to reflect upon and transform the temporal realm in a Christian sense.

Riassunto:

In questo contributo si sostiene che il teologo Lovaniense Gustave Thils avrebbe elaborato la "teologia delle realtà temporali" attraverso lettura delle opere dei celebri studiosi francesi Henri-Irénée Marrou, Jacques Maritain e Yves de Montcheuil. Dopo aver presentato le tesi di questi autori, si espone il modo in cui il Lovaniense, ispirato dalla loro riflessione sulla relazione fra Cristianesimo e realtà temporali, cercò di trascendere il loro pensiero condensandolo in un sistema teologico conciso. Pertanto, Thils, in *Théologie des réalités terrestres* e *Théologie et réalité sociale*, elabora una teoria per riflettere sulle realtà terrene, concentrandosi particolarmente sulla rivelazione e su un metodo che possa essere applicato dal fedele per esaminare le sue attività quotidiane. Questo approccio onnicomprensivo, dunque, potrebbe essere considerato quale elaborazione di un'antropologia teologica tesa a elaborare e trasformare la dimensione temporale in senso cristiano.

Key words: Gustave Thils, *Théologie des réalités terrestres*/Theology of the Temporal, Louvain Theology

