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# Nouvelle Théologie

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## *Nouvelle Théologie*

*Nouvelle théologie* is a theological movement attempting to renew theology by a return to biblical and patristic sources. It is associated with the period 1930–60 and the Jesuit

faculty at Fourvière, France. Since there was never a specific group of theologians who self-identified as representing a group by this name, a list of those associated with this movement varies from author to author. They certainly include the Jesuits Jean Daniélou, Henri de Lubac, Gaston Fessard, Henri Bouillard, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, although the Belgian Dominican M.-D. Chenu is also commonly associated with the thought of this group. The list also includes Hans Urs von Balthasar, who studied theology in Fourvière as a Jesuit.

The first to use the term *la nouvelle théologie* was an Italian, Msgr. Parente, in the February 1942 issue of *L'Osservatore Romano* in reference to two Dominican theologians, M.-D. Chenu and L. Charlier. Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange used it to refer to certain Jesuit theologians in 1946. Those associated with the movement tried to distance themselves from the term, de Lubac calling its existence a “myth,” Bouillard saying he had no such aspirations, and Congar calling it “an abusive term.” The term strangely contradicts the attempt of these theologians to renew theology by returning to scriptural, patristic, and liturgical sources. The movement was named by its detractors, who feared it to be a return to Modernism.

Jean Daniélou outlined the general orientation of this “new theology” in an article, “Les orientations présentes de la pensée religieuse,” in which he noted the gulf that had opened up between theology and the pressing concerns of the day. He lamented a progressive rupture between exegesis and systematic theology, each developing according to its own method, with a resulting aridity within systematic theology. The “new” orientation aimed at a reunification of theology through a return to Scripture, the Fathers, and a liturgical revival. The biblical renewal incorporated an interpretation of the Old Testament that restored its character as prophecy and figure, thereby underscoring its relation to the New Testament. The revival of patristic studies naturally followed the biblical renewal since the work of the Fathers was a commentary on Scripture incorporating just such a figurative interpretation of the Old Testament. The liturgical renewal reaffirmed the sign value of the liturgy and sought to better understand the symbolic elements of liturgical worship to balance a one-sided emphasis on the efficacy of liturgical action.

The *nouvelle théologie* is characterized by the French language of its primary figures, its emphasis on the category of history, its appeal to a positive theology and an inductive method over against a more speculative and deductive theology, and, finally, its critical attitude toward neo-scholasticism in which the conceptual system had priority over the relationship between theology, faith, and life (Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 9–11). Additional identifying attributes include its emphasis on the “economy” of the saving action of God in history as contrasted with a matrix of doctrines, its return to the dogma of the Mystical Body of Christ as foundational to the social identity of Catholicism, its preference for a kerygmatic theology which announces the Word of God, and its emphasis on the existential dimensions of theology and its impact on a life of faith.

M.-Michel Labourdette, M.-J. Nicolas, and R. Garrigou-Lagrange, all Dominicans and outspoken critics of the *nouvelle théologie*, defended scholasticism against what they perceived to be a theological approach that would jeopardize the immutability of doctrine and would fall into historical relativism. The Jesuits responded in what became a spirited exchange of articles. Joseph Komonchak points to the political ramifications of the debate insofar as Garrigou-Lagrange was a supporter of *Action*

*française* and a defender of Vichy, while many of the Jesuits associated with the *nouvelle théologie* resisted Nazism and the regime in occupied Vichy. When interpreted within its historical context, the *nouvelle théologie* is an argument for the relevance and prophetic voice of Christianity in a cultural milieu threatened by secularism, racism, and anti-Semitism.

Pius XII's encyclical *Humani generis* (1950) put a damper on the *nouvelle théologie* insofar as some thought that it targeted de Lubac's work on the supernatural, a charge that de Lubac vigorously denied. Nevertheless, he was removed from teaching for a time and a number of his books were removed from libraries and bookstores. The movement and its proponents were vindicated when some were appointed as *periti* at the Second Vatican Council.

*See also* Daniélou, Jean Cardinal, SJ; France; Lubac, Henri de, SJ; Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre, SJ; Theology

Komonchak, Joseph, "Theology and Culture at Mid-Century: The Example of Henri de Lubac." *Theological Studies* 51 (1990), 579–602.

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Mettepenningen, Jürgen, *Nouvelle Théologie—New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II*. New York: T & T Clark, 2010.