

### **The Salvation of Atheists and Catholic Dogmatic Theology**

by Stephen Bullivant (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), xi + 215 pp.

STEPHEN BULLIVANT'S MONOGRAPH offers a welcome contribution to an area in the theology of the Second Vatican Council that continues to require clarification fifty years after the Council. The aim of this work is to elucidate "how, within the parameters of Catholic theology, it is possible for an atheist to be saved" (2). While not intended as an apologetic response to the New Atheism, Bullivant is correct in observing that his work will challenge one item in the New Atheist arsenal, namely the assumption that individuals who happen to lack certain "religious information" are thereby automatically assumed to be damned (12). The primary focus of this study consists in elucidating two poignant sentences of *Lumen Gentium* (LG) §16:

Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life.

Faithful to the Catholic magisterial tradition, Bullivant makes his first principles clear from the outset: in accounting for how atheists might be saved, one must affirm that the Church is necessary for salvation, that Christ is the unique mediator between God and man, that faith and baptism are necessary, and that a person cognizant of this necessity who refuses to enter or persevere in the Church cannot be saved (9). It is likewise the author's Catholic faith that leads him to suggest early on that the putative salvation of atheists would involve a period in Purgatory (10).

Chapter 1 consists in the prolegomenal quest to understand what atheism is before proceeding to theologize about it. Bullivant departs from the "common-speech McGrathian" understanding of an atheist as one who makes a principled and informed decision to reject belief in God (15). In this monograph, "atheist" simply denotes a person

who is without belief in God or gods.<sup>1</sup> Thus the term embraces both “positive” (believing-not) and “negative” (not-believing) atheists, the former representing those who deny that God exists while the latter includes agnostics as well as logical positivists who deny any meaning to the word “God” (16). This classification is warranted given that *LG* §16, refers not to those who expressly disbelieve in God, but rather more generally to those who have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God (17).

An awkward wrinkle Bullivant pauses to consider concerns the question of atheism in relation to non-theistic religious traditions such as Theravada Buddhism, Jainism, and Confucianism. Members of these traditions are atheists in the sense adopted by the author. However, with respect to salvation, he argues that their situation is “arguably very different” from that of the non-religious atheists upon which the book focuses (28). Bullivant is consistent here in categorizing certain religious adherents as atheists while at the same time duly emphasizing that they may be in contact with a reality that the non-religious atheist is not. This aligns well with magisterial teaching concerning the avenues by which members of non-Christian religious traditions receive grace.<sup>2</sup>

Chapter 2 focuses on Vatican II’s treatment of atheism and its preconciliar antecedents. Over the course of the chapter, the author interacts with the work of theological giants Blondel, de Lubac, Maritain, Schillebeeckx, Daniélou, and Congar. Of particular importance for Bullivant’s project is the dogma *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, which has undergone “genuine development” through a positive reformulation wherein we now understand the statement not to intend simply that those outside the visible Church are damned, but

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<sup>1</sup> The author also takes up the question of the “practical atheist” and correctly concludes that, in the sense commonly accorded the term today, such a person is not an atheist at all, but rather a defective form of believer (21). Atheism is near-universally understood as a person’s position relating to God’s existence, rather than to whether one is living in accord with the belief in God he professes (24).

<sup>2</sup> Thus, in *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991), the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue states, with references to the Second Vatican Council’s *Ad Gentes*: “Concretely, it will be in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious traditions and by following the dictates of their conscience that the members of other religions respond positively to God’s invitation and receive salvation in Jesus Christ, even while they do not recognize or acknowledge him as their savior” (§29).

rather that it is by the Church alone that one is saved (50). Drawing on Ratzinger, the author concludes that the primary question for theology now concerns not whether the atheists can be saved, but how the certainty of this possibility is to be maintained alongside the absolute requirement of the Church and her faith (51).

In addition to considering *LG* §16 at this point, Bullivant rightly draws his readers' attention to *Gaudium et Spes* (*GS*) §§19–22. In contrast with the tendency of preconciliar theology, Vatican II gives a sympathetic overview of the varieties and causes of modern atheism, with *GS* §19, going so far as to note that “believers can have no small part” in its rise. Meanwhile, *GS* §22 arguably contains the most developed conciliar teaching on grace in relation to non-believers, teaching that the Son of God “has united Himself in some fashion with every man” by virtue of his Incarnation. In this same paragraph, the document affirms that Christ died for all men and that “grace works in an unseen way” in the hearts of all who are of good will. The Holy Spirit “offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery,” even as the manner in which this occurs is known only to God.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to critiquing Karl Rahner's theology in relation to the salvation of atheists. The author does not take this enterprise lightly, noting that to cast doubt on the Rahner's approach is to thereby cast doubt on the dominant account of the salvation of atheists within Catholic theology (3). Bullivant's critique in this chapter focuses on one key aspect of Rahner's theory: the question of how a saved atheist is to fulfill the criterion of possessing faith (79). Based on the premises that membership in the Church is necessary for salvation and that God wills the salvation of all people (cf. 1 Tim 2:4), Rahner concluded that, somehow, all men must be capable of belonging to the Church even if they have not come to an explicit acceptance of Christ. Bullivant, on the other hand, questions whether salvation requires *membership* in the Church or simply *mediation* by the Church, as in the interpretations advanced by Ratzinger, Congar, and de Lubac (78).

The author detects three major problems in Rahner's concept of implicit faith. First, he questions the cogency of an appeal to anonymous, non-propositional, pre-linguistic faith. Citing John Searle, he contends that Rahner's foundation is dubious in light of the fact that “the notion of the unconscious is one of the most confused and ill thought-out concepts of modern intellectual life” (99). Second, Bullivant believes that the concept of implicit faith “poses intrac-

table philosophical and theological difficulties” (101), largely due to his having extended the concept of implicit faith “a very long way from the traditional understanding” (104). In contrast with the Thomistic tradition in which a member of the Christian community who is unable to articulate fully all its teachings may be described as possessing implicit faith, for Rahner, the act of faith itself is thought to be implicit within a person’s thoughts and actions. Thus, Rahner’s articulation of implicit faith is “at the very most” analogical to the Thomistic one (104). A third problem Bullivant identifies in Rahner is the dubiety of his primacy of empirical evidence, in other words the general implausibility of imputing faith to virtuous unbelievers. Although Bullivant takes for granted the possibility of such faith, he believes that such cases are exceptional and likely quite rare (109–10).

The author bolsters his last criticism with a thought-provoking analogy based on the observation that a geocentrist might rightly believe that it is daytime in Britain when it is nighttime in Australia. Though his geocentric reasons for believing this are false, there is no need to impute to him any implicit belief in heliocentrism in order to explain his correct belief in the relative day and night times on opposite sides of the world. In like manner, Bullivant argues, one need not impute any kind of faith to Rahner’s alleged “anonymous Christian” in order to admit that such a person possesses exemplary virtue. Concisely summarizing, he states: “Even though there *is*, in fact, a God, and even *if* morality and meaningfulness are, at bottom, illogical without one, the fact remains that [this] kind of life . . . is perfectly possible without supposing it to demonstrate any ‘existentially actualized theism’” (109).

In chapter 4, Bullivant shifts his attention from critique to proposal, outlining a new framework for interpreting *LG* §16 through a renewed understanding of invincible ignorance. Throughout the chapter, the author applies his considerations to “Jane,” a non-theistic Buddhist. Adopting the “D’Costan paradigm,” the author identifies Christ’s descent into the abode of the dead on Holy Saturday as the key event that makes possible a resolution to the question of how an atheist may be saved. He rejects Clement of Rome’s suggestion that the dead to whom Christ preached underwent a postmortem conversion (120). Following the interpretation of Bellarmine, he argues that the text describing Christ’s descent in 1 Peter 3 has in its sights specifically those people “in the days of Noah” who drowned in the Flood despite the fact that they had repented (1 Pet 3:20). These were the “spirits in prison” to whom Christ preached (1 Pet 3:18–19). Thus,

Christ descended to the netherworld to rescue those who were to be saved, not those who were damned. Nevertheless, these individuals who repented still had to wait in Sheol or the *limbus partum* for the coming of Christ wherein the process begun in their response while drowning in the Flood would be brought to completion.

From this perspective, Christ's preaching to the spirits in prison is understood as the announcement that what the deceased had secretly desired while on earth—their redemption—is now here in Christ. In this way, the explicit "epistemological relationship to Christ" required for salvation is rectified for an atheist in the event of Christ's descent (122). If Bullivant is correct, then there are epistemologically and ontologically millions of unevangelized in the same state as those were in the *limbus partum* before Christ's descent. For the pre-Incarnation just, Christ's coming was necessary both to open heaven (objective aspect) and to bring these just into an epistemological relationship with himself (subjective aspect), whereas an atheist saved today may subjectively exist in the state of those who entered the limbo of the just even though, objectively speaking, the gates of heaven have been opened by Christ (123).

At this point Bullivant turns directly to *LG* §16 for evidence in support of his position. In speaking of those who have "not yet accepted" (*nondum acceperunt*) the Gospel, the Council implies that everyone who is to be saved must at some point explicitly accept the Gospel. Given the possibility of a saved atheist, it follows that "[s]ome manner of *post-mortem* solution thus seems to be required by *LG* 16" (126). This inference is the linchpin of Bullivant's argument, and his responses to possible objections are well-reasoned. However, even after reading his presentation, one may still wonder whether the author is reading too much into the Council's intention with its use of *nondum* rather than the simpler *non*. For this interpretation to be conclusive, evidence from interventions by the Council Fathers on this point would need to be adduced.

A final intriguing feature of this chapter is its recourse to "sociology of knowledge" in accounting for the widespread phenomenon of atheism in our day. An evangelist's mere assertion of Christ's existence is clearly not sufficient to oblige consent on the part of an atheist. What is more, in a pluralistic society that makes all truth claims relative, it may be that many people are never confronted with a plausible presentation of the Gospel. In this connection, Bullivant goes so far as to say that one could even be brought up nominally as

a Christian without ever truly hearing the Gospel (145). Adapting a metaphor from Richard Dawkins, he observes that people may be inoculated against the “virus” of Christianity by being subjected to small doses of “dead” Christianity in their youth (145n21). In other words, the misconduct of Christians may so defame Christianity as to cause invincible ignorance in would-be believers. Given this scenario, the author believes that we have strong a theoretical foundation for a “presumption of innocence” or “salvation optimism” (73 and 146). All the same, Bullivant hastens to add an important qualification from GS §19—namely, that those who willfully drive God from their heart and refuse to follow their conscience are “not devoid of fault” (139).<sup>3</sup>

In chapter 5, the author rounds out his solution to the problemata of previous chapters by means of a specific interpretation of Matthew 25:31–46. In brief, Bullivant proposes that atheists can be saved in accordance with what they have done to Christ’s “least ones.” Thus, the title of the chapter: *extra minimos nulla salus* (“apart from the least ones, no salvation”). Whereas the dominant strand of Patristic exegesis saw these *minimi* as Christ’s disciples, Bullivant advocates an “unrestricted” understanding of this class of individuals (153). Conceding that this reading does not represent “the overwhelming witness of the tradition” and that it might not capture the evangelist’s intention, the author argues that it does resolve two problems in D’Costa’s account: the impossibility of postmortem conversion and the atheist’s lack of opportunities for encountering grace.

In a move all-too rarely made in contemporary theology, Bullivant offers hagiographical evidence to corroborate his claim. After a delightful analysis of how his paradigm is reflected in the lives of St. Benedict and St. Martin de Tours (155–56), the author dwells at greater length on the theology of Blessed Mother Teresa, who taught that Christ is present “in his distressing disguise” in the poor themselves (162). If this presence is as the saints describe it, then moral atheists not only act under the influence of grace but also

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<sup>3</sup> In his conclusion, the author likewise makes it clear that he is not proposing universal salvation, although he does follow Balthasar in stating that it is possible to hope that all might be saved. For an insightful critique of Balthasar’s position, see Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 129–90. In this work, Martin also poses a thoughtful challenge to Bullivant’s assumption that Vatican II’s theology reflects “salvation optimism” or entails a “presumption of innocence” (ibid., 55).

have an objective encounter with Christ himself when performing corporal works of mercy for his “least ones” (165–67). Echoing D’Costa, Bullivant thus argues that the atheist already in this life has an “ontological relationship” with Christ, whereas the requisite “epistemological relationship” with him will only be rectified post-mortem (173). None of this, he argues, requires that we attribute to the atheist implicit or anonymous faith; rather, in this case it is *Christ* who is anonymous. Briefly stated: “Anonymous Christs do not entail anonymous Christians” (172).

In conclusion, Bullivant’s postmortem resolution in light of Matthew 25 is plausible and well-argued. For this reader, a significant remaining objection concerns how he seems to imply the presence of charity in an atheist while denying that this virtue is accompanied by at least implicit faith. It is difficult to see how the salvific grace an atheist receives in his encounter with Christ’s “least ones” is not accompanied by some noetic content. Perhaps it is worth exploring a possible reconciliation to this problem in the encyclical *Lumen Fidei*. Insisting that “love requires truth,” co-authors Benedict XVI and Francis invoke the biblical and Patristic tradition in teaching that love itself is “a kind of knowledge possessed of its own logic.”<sup>4</sup> Regardless of whether this last suggestion proves fruitful or whether one is convinced of Bullivant’s claim that the standard Catholic understanding of how atheists might be saved is untenable, his book deserves a careful reading. The work succeeds in its quest for “creative fidelity” and, accordingly, merits both admiration and emulation. **N-V**

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**Living the Good Life: A Beginner’s Thomistic Ethics** by Steven J. Jensen (*Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013*), ix + 205 pp.

IN *LIVING THE GOOD LIFE*, Steven Jensen attempts to elucidate Thomas Aquinas’s basic moral philosophy and, along the way, refute several prominent objections (both scholarly and popular) to this philosophy. Inasmuch as this book is an introductory text, Jensen succeeds in summarizing a number of the foundational principles

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<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei* (2013), §28.