

Apologetic Theology and the Challenge of Rationalism

The Theological Project of Arnold Tits (1807-1851) and Louvain Traditionalism

Leo Kenis

Abstract. — Arnold Tits (1807-1851) was a theology professor at the Catholic University of Louvain from 1840 to 1851. He became renowned with his design of an apologetic theology based on traditionalist ideas concerning human knowledge and religious faith, which he developed with his colleague, the philosopher G. C. Ubaghs. From the start, this project was increasingly criticized by proponents of classic Catholic theology. In the 1860s it was condemned by the Holy See, and later on replaced by Neo-Thomism that immediately gained prominence in Louvain. This account of Tits and Louvain traditionalism is concluded with some remarks on the significance and representativity of this project of Catholic fundamental theology as a genuine form of apologetic theology.

In this article I shall present the career and significance of Arnold Tits, a Louvain theologian from the 19th century, who today is almost completely forgotten. It is my intention to show that this theologian deserves the reputation he enjoyed during his short life, because he was the designer of an interesting but never completed project of fundamental theology, which can be defined as apologetic theology. At the same time, his position was exemplary for an open and critical attitude of Catholic theologians towards contemporary thought in the first part of the century, which eventually was interrupted partly due to evolutions in the relation of theologians and church authorities.¹

* This article is the extended version of a farewell lecture delivered at KU Leuven on 16 November 2018, at the celebration of the author's retirement as a professor of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies. The lecture style is partly preserved in the present text.

1. Recent literature on Tits is extremely scarce. Among contemporary literature most important is: N. J. Laforet, *La vie et les travaux d'Arnold Tits, ancien professeur à la Faculté de théologie de l'Université catholique de Louvain* (Brussels: H. Goemaere, 1853). All the published and unpublished works by Tits, including a list of studies on his life

1. Arnold Tits, a Popular but Forgotten Theologian

Petrus Arnoldus Tits was born on 14 September 1807 in Aalst, near Sint-Truiden, in the province of Limburg (in present-day Belgium). The times were difficult and insecure in these regions. In the post-revolutionary period, the southern Low Countries had become part of the French Empire, and in 1815, the Congress of Vienna decided to join them with the northern regions into the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. Finally, in 1830, they would become an independent nation as the Kingdom of Belgium, separated from the Netherlands. Those turbulent circumstances had a profound influence on the youth and education of Arnold Tits. In 1825, at the conclusion of his secondary school in the college of Sint-Truiden, he decided to become a priest. However, the normal path of preparatory philosophical studies in a minor seminary was cut off because of the conflict between the Dutch king William I and the southern Catholic bishops on the issue of priestly education. In June 1825, in an attempt to improve the intellectual level of the southern clergy the king had opened the *Collegium Philosophicum* at the State University of Louvain, the latter being established in 1817. All candidates for the priesthood were required to enter the propaedeutic philosophical education at this institute. Simultaneously, the diocesan minor seminaries, which hitherto provided such preparatory training, were suppressed. The southern bishops resolutely rejected this state interference in the education of their clergy and decided to boycott the *Collegium Philosophicum*. In this situation, it was impossible for the young Arnold Tits to start his studies in an appropriate institution. He was forced to engage in the study of philosophy on his own. Initially he did so through self-study, later he was mentored by Georges Smets, a priest in Tilleur. After a while, Tits himself also began to teach philosophy to younger candidates for the priesthood. In 1830, upon Belgian independence, Tits was able to continue his theological studies at the major seminary of Liège. In 1832 he was ordained a priest and one year later his bishop,

and works, are found in: Leo Kenis, *The Louvain Faculty of Theology in the Nineteenth Century: A Bibliography of the Professors in Theology and Canon Law, with Biographical Notes*, *Annua Nuntia Lovaniensia* 34 (Leuven: Leuven University Press and Peeters, 1994), 191-194. An extensive account of Tits' career in the context of Louvain's Faculty of Theology is given by id., *De Theologische Faculteit te Leuven in de negentiende eeuw 1834-1889*, *Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België: Klasse der Letteren* 54/143 (Brussels: Koninklijke Academie, 1992), with a summary in English (488-501); in addition, see id., "The Louvain Faculty of Theology and Its Professors: 1834-1889," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 67 (1991): 398-414.

Cornelis van Bommel, appointed him as philosophy lecturer at the minor seminary of Rolduc (in present-day Dutch Limburg).

In Rolduc, Arnold Tits became one of the major professors. In his lectures he gave an extensive critical examination of contemporary, mainly German, philosophy. He also offered a yearly series of *Conférences philosophiques sur les points capitaux de la controverse religieuse*, in which he elaborated his viewpoint on current religious disputes and developed a Catholic reply to contemporary criticism of religion.² These reflections formed the basis of what later was known as Louvain traditionalism, a philosophy that Tits developed in Rolduc in cooperation with his Dutch colleague, Gerard Casimir Ubaghs. Meanwhile, Tits became more widely known through a series of polemical articles published in *Revue de Bruxelles*, directed against the philosopher Heinrich Ahrens, a professor at the (liberal) *Université Libre de Bruxelles*, and against the idealistic system of Ahrens' teacher, Karl Krause.³

In 1840 Arnold Tits was appointed to the chair of general dogmatic theology at the Faculty of Theology of the Catholic University of Louvain, which in 1834 was re-established by the Belgian bishops at Mechelen (Malines) and a year later returned to Louvain, after the closure of the State University there. Immediately, Tits was granted the honorary degree of doctor in theology, and in 1845 he was promoted to ordinary professor. In cooperation with Ubaghs, who had been a philosophy professor in Louvain since 1834, he further developed his traditionalist-inspired apologetics. From the very beginning, Tits' teaching was enthusiastically received by his students. He published only a limited number of scholarly articles, but worked steadily on a voluminous handbook, entitled *Theologia generalis*, which was a handwritten text only available as lithography. His intention to publish the three-volume work was not realized, because on 9 July 1851, he died from a lingering disease. The story of his death fits perfectly in the contemporary ideal image of a priest-professor at Louvain.⁴ On that day, when Tits stood working in his study, he suddenly suffered a stroke. Since he had to be treated as fast as possible, he was laid down on a mattress in the middle of his study. And there, surrounded by his

2. The content of these conferences is described in detail by Laforet, *La vie et les travaux d'Arnold Tits*, 29-99.

3. Published in five extensive articles in *Revue de Bruxelles* (Jan. 1838): 39-62; (May 1839): 1-25 and (June 1839): 57-83; (Sept. 1839): 56-103; (Aug. 1840): 1-41; (Dec. 1840): 1-43; and concluded with *Un dernier mot à M. Ahrens, ou examen de la morale philosophique du panthéisme* (Louvain: Vanlinthout et Vandenzande, 1841). Complete information in Kenis, *The Louvain Faculty of Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, 193, nos. 1, 3-7.

4. See Laforet, *La vie et les travaux d'Arnold Tits*, 218-219.

books, the professor lost his life, hardly forty-four years old. For Arnold Tits the usual portrayal of a Louvain priest-professor was probably more than just a collection of clichés which more or less tend to be hagiography. In Tits' funeral oration, the university's Rector Pierre De Ram praised his deep faith, his benevolence, and his great humility.⁵ For the rest, his entire existence was characterized by "une sévère uniformité," his only diversion consisting of contacts with his students. The people's gratitude to the professor was so great that one year after his departure a huge memorial to him was erected in his native village.

The impression Arnold Tits made was particularly related to his intellectual achievements. The Louvain philosopher Nicolas Laforet, Tits' only doctoral student and later the successor of Pierre De Ram as rector of the University of Louvain, did not hesitate to rate Tits among the most profound metaphysicians of all times!⁶ This extremely high appreciation can, of course, partially be ascribed to admiration for his Doktorvater. Still, the recognition was equally – be it in more moderate words – expressed by most of his contemporaries. Apparently, Arnold Tits impressed many through his intellectual sharpness and profundity. Hence the question arises: how, then, to explain that his name nearly completely faded into oblivion?

In order to clarify this, I shall first expound Tits' significance for the renewed design of the theology programs at the Louvain faculty. Then I shall describe the philosophy developed by Tits and Ubaghs, and finally I shall deal with the fierce opposition Tits and his colleagues evoked with their theories, which continued long after Tits' death and ended in a condemnation of Louvain traditionalism.

2. Tits as a Professor at the Louvain Faculty of Theology

As indicated above, in 1841 Tits was appointed at Louvain to the chair of "théologie dogmatique générale." This course was created in 1838 through the splitting up of the course of dogmatic theology into two

5. P. F. X. De Ram, "Discours prononcé à la Salle des Promotions le 14 juillet 1851 [...] après le service funèbre célébré en l'église primaire de Saint-Pierre pour le repos de l'âme de M. Arnould-Pierre Tits, professeur ord. de théologie dogmatique générale à la Faculté de théologie," *Annuaire de l'Université catholique de Louvain* 16 (1852): 171-194; also published in *Revue catholique* 9 (1851-52): 307-319.

6. "... je ne crois pas me laisser abuser par l'amitié en plaçant le professeur Tits au premier rang des plus profonds métaphysiciens de tous les âges." Laforet, *La vie et les travaux d'Arnold Tits*, 2.

parts: general dogmatics and special dogmatics. With this duplication dogmatic theology became the core of the teaching at the Faculty of Theology. This decision is to be situated within a larger renewal of the formation of the clergy, which was undertaken by the Belgian bishops since the reopening of their seminaries.⁷ During the preceding decades, the quality of the training of the clergy, resumed after the crisis of the Revolution, had seriously decayed. From 1841 to 1849, in an effort to remedy this decline the bishops organized annual consultations with seminary professors from all the Belgian dioceses in order to improve the structure and method of clerical education. By the end of these consultations, the Louvain Faculty of Theology was also involved in this process of renewal. In 1851 the Louvain theologians sent an elaborate series of recommendations to the archbishop. The report was signed by Arnold Tits and his colleague Jan Theodoor Beelen, then dean and secretary of the faculty, respectively.⁸ The majority part of the report was dedicated to the discipline of dogmatic theology, more specifically to general dogmatic theology, which was, actually, Tits' own specialty.⁹

Tits' exposition on general dogmatic theology is worthwhile mentioning since it was only during these first decades of the 19th century that Catholic theologians developed this branch of theology as a full, separate discipline – it was still labeled with different names, such as general dogmatics, apologetic theology, apologetics, but also Christian philosophy of religion, or *Theologia generalis*, the title Tits used for his handbook. This foundational discipline – today often called fundamental theology – studies the general principles forming the basis on which special dogmatics can expose the various doctrines of Christianity.

Tits divided general dogmatic theology into four subject areas.

(1) In the introductory part, epistemological and methodological

7. On this initiative see Leo Kenis, "Movements toward Renewal: The Belgian Church and the Improvement of Clerical Education 1830-50," *Dutch Review of Church History – Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis* 83 (2003): 371-389.

8. The unpublished report was entitled, *Réponses aux Questions proposées par Nos Seigneurs les Evêques de Belgique à la Faculté de Théologie de l'Université Catholique de Louvain par l'intermédiaire du Recteur Magnifique*, 8 f°; it was dated 26 February 1850 (manuscript of Tits); copies in the Diocesan Archives in Bruges, *Documenten betreffende bisschoppen en vicarissen*, Malou, B 284, and in the Diocesan Archives of Liège, *Fonds Van Bommel*, 22.

9. This part of the report, which reflected Tits' view, was published by De Ram, "Discours [...] Arnould-Pierre Tits," 191-194, n. 13, and by Laforet, *La vie et les travaux d'Arnold Tits*, 169-173.

questions are treated. General dogmatics studies the natural principles that lay the foundation of all human knowledge and certainty, with special attention to their relation with faith. (2) Then, the so-called *praeambula fidei* are studied, including issues such as the existence of God, human freedom, the immortality of the soul, and the basic ideas of religion and morals. All these subjects can be subsumed under the concept 'natural religion'; hence this study is called *theologia naturalis*. (3) Further, Tits mentions the classic *demonstratio christiana*, which considers the concept and necessity of Christian revelation, and (4) finally, there is the *demonstratio catholica*, a continuation of anti-Reformation controversial theology, which considers the Church as a rule of faith and as means to know and preserve revelation.

Tits emphasized the importance of the first two treatises, dealing with the status of human knowledge and the basic truths of Christian faith. In fact, in his view, they formed the center of what he called "philosophie chrétienne," a Christian philosophy, that engaged in the discussions with the prevailing philosophical systems. In critical dialogue with the heirs of enlightened thought and Kantian critical philosophy, there was a challenge to demonstrate the legitimacy of Christian faith.¹⁰

In Louvain, Tits further developed this program by putting much of his energy into working on *Theologia generalis*, his *magnum opus* that he intended to publish. The more elaborate title of part two of the handbook reveals the apologetic intention of the work: *Theologia generalis recentiorum philosophorum et theologorum acatholicorum erroribus opposita*. Tits exposed his views through criticism of his theological and philosophical discussion partners. Among the theologians, his critique was principally directed against Georg Hermes and in philosophy he carried on an elaborate critical discussion with the pantheistic systems of Hegel, Fichte, Schelling, and their followers. Furthermore, on various topics he showed how traditionalist categories were fit to clarify theological concepts. But before going into detail on these views, the question might be raised: what was traditionalism?

10. Tits insisted on the importance of these issues: "Ces questions sont d'autant plus importantes aujourd'hui que c'est là qu'il faut trouver une réfutation approfondie des faux principes répandus par le rationalisme moderne sur les prétendus droits de la raison, ses prérogatives, et son indépendance à l'égard de toute espèce de foi et d'autorité." *Réponses*, f° 5 (Laforet, *La vie et les travaux d'Arnold Tits*, 170).

3. Louvain Traditionalism and Ontologism

Traditionalism

It may be useful, as a start, to give a concise characterization of the term traditionalism, as it is used in its 19th-century context.¹¹ First of all, it refers to a group of thinkers outside theology. The term arose around the 1830's and included two general opinions about the qualities and capacities of human knowledge: our knowledge originates in revelation, and human thought is dependent on language and tradition. This theory developed by what has been called "oppositional parallelization"¹²: the concept displays an opposition to existent rationalism. Nearly all Catholic philosophers and theologians called their opponents 'the rationalists'. Rationalism was considered the major challenge of Christian thought, and the term not only referred to philosophical rationalism but equally, in theology, to the excessive adaptations to modern thought present in many forms of Christian (obviously Protestant, but also Catholic) theology. Rationalism referred to the main feature – or error – of modern thought: the unrestrained, overstated trust in the power of autonomous reason. And the answer to such rationalism which focuses all attention on human *ratio*, was to be found in what these authors summarized with the term *traditio*. Hence traditionalism, a philosophical current especially developed in France, inspired by theories of authors such as Louis de Bonald and Félicité de Lamennais and represented by contemporaries like Louis Bautain (although his thought is most often called fideism) and Augustin Bonnetty. This philosophical traditionalism was connected to, but should not be confused with, political traditionalism of authors

11. Surveys on traditionalism (and ontologism) that take into account the contribution of Louvain are: Edgar Hocedez, *Histoire de la théologie au XIX^e siècle*. Vol. II: *Épanouissement de la théologie 1831-1870*, Museum Lessianum: Section théologique 44 (Brussels: L'Édition universelle; Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1952); Norbert Hötzel, *Die Uroffenbarung im französischen Traditionalismus*, Münchener Theologische Studien. II: Systematische Abteilung 24 (Munich: Max Hueber Verlag, 1962); Bernard Reardon, *Liberalism and Tradition: Aspects of Catholic Thought in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 20-164; Gerald A. McCool, *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century: The Quest for a Unitary Method* (New York: Seabury, 1977), 37-58, 113-128; Karl Heinz Neufeld, "Traditionalismus und Ontologismus in Belgien und Frankreich," in *Christliche Philosophie im katholischen Denken des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Emerich Coreth, Walter M. Neidl, and Georg Pfligersdorffer (Graz, Vienna, and Cologne: Styria, 1987), I: 500-506.

12. Siegfried Wiedenhofer, "Tradition, Traditionalismus," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1990), VI: 643-645 ("oppositionelle Parallelbildung").

such as Joseph de Maistre, who advocated the return to a monarchic model of sovereignty, ideally represented by the pope of Rome.

Against the rationalist exaltation of autonomous reason traditionalists hold that individual reason, in view of obtaining knowledge of the fundamental metaphysical and moral truths, is dependent on an external instance. The individual can know truths such as the existence of God or human freedom only by means of social instruction. It must rely on a *sens commun*, common sense, a natural sense of reasonability shared by all human beings, which is handed on by tradition.

Semi-traditionalism – Ontologism – Traditionalist Ontologism

The Louvain philosophers and theologians developed their traditionalist project of a Christian philosophy in a specific direction, which brought them to distance themselves on certain aspects from earlier and contemporary traditionalist thinkers.¹³ According to the Louvainists, knowledge of the fundamental truths is inborn to human beings. This implies that the contribution of social instruction and tradition is not absolutely necessary; it is only important as a stimulus that enables the development of what is virtually present in the individual. Through this emphasis on the innate character of fundamental ideas Louvain philosophy is considered as a moderate form of traditionalism – semi-traditionalism. Later on, it developed in the direction of ontologism. Contrary to psychologizing theories of knowledge, Louvain philosophers underscored the realism of innate ideas. Ideas are no mere modalities of the knowing consciousness, rather they are aspects of reality existing independently from it. In this sense, in historical surveys of philosophy 19th-century Louvain philosophy is sometimes classified under the heading “traditionalist ontologism.”¹⁴

The Theologia generalis

This Louvain version of traditionalism has become widely known through the writings of Gerard Casimir Ubaghs. He published philosophical manuals, that were printed in various editions and used not only in Louvain

13. On Louvain traditionalism the authoritative analysis remains: J. Henry, “Le Traditionalisme et l’Ontologisme à l’Université de Louvain (1835-1865),” *Annales de l’Institut Supérieur de Philosophie* 5 (1924): 41-150 (followed by nearly all surveys mentioned in n. 11).

14. Thus, among others, Maurice De Wulf, *Histoire de la philosophie en Belgique* (Brussels: A. De Wit; Paris: F. Alcan, 1910), 298 (“ontologisme traditionaliste”).

but also in a number of theological education centers in Belgium and the Netherlands. His major handbooks are the *Logica* and especially the *Theodicea*, and later he published *Essai d'idéologie ontologique*,¹⁵ in which he explained the ontologist development of his philosophy. At the same time, there was a great consensus that Arnold Tits was the inspiring and leading figure of Louvain traditionalism. His major work in this regard was the above-mentioned *Theologia generalis*, the handbook he used in the Faculty of Theology. It is worthwhile to briefly survey the contents of this voluminous work, that was never published.¹⁶

In the first tractate of *Theologia generalis*, the “introductio philosophica” to his theology, Tits treats the questions concerning the certainty of knowledge, the relation between faith and reason, the certitude and necessity of faith, and, finally, the relation between philosophy and theology. Tits approaches these questions from the basic philosophical affirmation of the complementarity between a primary understanding of truths through an act of faith and the aposteriori explanation of these truths by reason. In his exposition he not only confronts rationalism but also the other extreme position, which he calls “supernaturalismus exclusorius.”¹⁷ But his principal opponent is the ‘semi-rationalist’ theologian Georg Hermes. According to Tits, with his design of a reasonable faith (“vernünftiger Glaube”) Hermes falls into the one-sidedness of Cartesianism by taking methodical doubt as a starting point of his thought.¹⁸ Thus Hermes ignores the spontaneous faith and moral certitude that, according to Tits, are at the origin of any religious knowledge.

The second tractate, *Theodicea christiana*, deals in a very elaborate way with the central questions of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. Here, Tits draws links with the critical studies he published earlier in his polemics with Ahrens and other representatives

15. Gerard Casimir Ubaghs, *Logicae seu Philosophiae rationalis elementa* (Louvain: Vanlinthout et Vandenzande, 1834, 6th ed. 1860); id., *Theodiceae seu Theologiae naturalis elementa* (Louvain: Vanlinthout et Vandenzande, 1841, 4th ed. 1863); id., *Essai d'idéologie ontologique, ou considérations philosophiques sur la nature de nos idées et sur l'ontologisme en général* (Louvain: Vanlinthout, 1860).

16. Tits wrote two versions of the work. Only the first two parts of the second version are known to us. The revised version of Part 1 was entitled, *Theologiae generalis Praelectionum pars I* (finished 22 Febr. 1849); Part 2 had the subtitle: *Theodicea christiana sive Tractatus philosophico-theologicus de fundamentis naturalibus religionis generatim spectatae* (2 vols.; incomplete, ended 25 Jan. 1850). A summary of the entire work is given by Laforet, *La vie et les travaux d'Arnold Tits*, 179-210 (Laforet had the complete text of Tits' second version at his disposal).

17. *Theologia generalis*, vol. 1, 196-207. Tits criticizes Louis Bautain and Alexander Ignaz von Sieger (an opponent of Hermes).

18. *Ibid.*, 156-196.

of rationalist pantheism. He provides his students with a comprehensive and critical analysis of the systems of great German philosophers such as Fichte, Schelling and Hegel.¹⁹ Thus, he argues that the Hegelian critique on the representation of God as a person logically leads to the rejection of God's existence as such. Indications about the disastrous consequences of such pantheism are found in the works of the "Hegelian rigidiors," such as Ludwig Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer, and David Friedrich Strauß.²⁰

Following this critical confrontation, Tits discusses extensively the "vera Dei cognitio," starting with a historical account of the debate on the proofs of God's existence since Scholasticism, and concludes with a concise summary of the possibilities to demonstrate the existence of God.²¹ The core of the theodicy treatise is, then, treated by an exposition on the divine attributes and the personhood of God. Especially the latter chapter is broadly elaborated in a reflection on the dogma of the Trinity. According to Tits, this treatise of special dogmatic theology should also be included in a Christian theodicy. Against rationalist critique, it should demonstrate that the dogma of the Trinity is rationally conceivable and even necessary to understand the creation of the world. Finally, the theodicy is concluded with expositions on the human soul, its nature, origin and immortality.

The speculative interests of Tits are equally discernible in the third tractate, the *Demonstratio christiana*.²² Following an explanation on religion in general and preceding the treatment of the *motiva credibilitatis*, the idea of revelation receives much attention, and again rationalism is the major opponent. It may be useful to follow Tits' views on this issue in one of the few articles he published, entitled "De la révélation considérée dans ses rapports avec la raison et la religion naturelles."²³ With broad strokes he sketches the various parts of what he calls a philosophy of revelation ("philosophie de la révélation"), which demonstrates the

19. *Theologia generalis*, vol. 2/1, 32-114, 115-185, 185-278.

20. *Ibid.*, vol. 2/1, 279-346. In his critique on Hegel and the Hegelians, Tits, like many of his Catholic colleagues, relies on the works of the German theologian Franz Anton Staudenmaier, particularly his *Darstellung und Kritik des Hegelschen Systems aus dem Standpunkte der christlichen Philosophie* (1844) and *Philosophie des Christentums* (1846). Later in his theodicy, Tits regularly refers to the first parts of Staudenmaier's *Christliche Dogmatik* (1844-1852).

21. *Theologia generalis*, vol. 2/1, 625-641.

22. See the survey in Laforet, *La vie et les travaux d'Arnold Tits*, 201-205. As said above, for tractates three and four we must rely on the summaries by Laforet.

23. A. Tits, "De la révélation considérée dans ses rapports avec la raison et la religion naturelles," *Revue catholique* 4 (1846-47): 612-623, 665-674; 5 (1847-48): 1-8.

necessity of revelation. It is remarkable to see how Tits clarifies basic aspects of this treatise by making use of categories conceived by traditionalist philosophy. It enables him to define revealed religion by means of familiar traditionalist terms such as instruction, tradition and faith.²⁴ Tits concludes the tractate with historical questions concerning the relation of the Jewish-Christian religion with primitive, pagan religious traditions.

In the fourth, least elaborated tractate of *Theologia generalis*, the *Demonstratio catholica*, Tits puts the emphasis on the authority of the Church as *regula fidei*.²⁵ For the discussion on this issue he regularly agrees with the viewpoint of the Roman theologian Giovanni Perrone, who in his treatise *De locis theologicis* intentionally discusses the question of Church authority prior to considering Scripture and Tradition. By focussing, in his treatise on the Church, on the one, infallible authority principle as rule of faith, Tits joins the apologetically oriented ecclesiology of which Perrone was the major representative.²⁶

This concise survey of the contents of the *Theologia generalis* gives an idea of the subjects that Arnold Tits taught in his courses. In view of assessing the impact of this teaching, it is interesting to observe that his students were obliged, so to speak, to adopt and uphold his views in the so-called *theses quas*, the theses they had to defend during public disputes (*disputationes*) as part of their exams.²⁷ When we consider the *theses quas* defended by STB-students during the period of Tits' teaching, the theses related to the first two parts of his course by far surpassed all others in

24. In summary, applied to the Christian religion, "[l]e christianisme a sa source dans une *révélation* positive et surnaturelle; il s'est répandu dans le monde par un *enseignement* également positif; il se conserve par *la tradition*, et repose sur *la foi*. Ainsi foi, enseignement, tradition, tels sont les principes qui constituent, dans leur ensemble, la base du christianisme, et qui renferment en même temps les seuls moyens à l'aide desquels l'homme puisse arriver à le connaître: base et moyens tout à fait naturels, puisqu'ils découlent tout ensemble des lois les plus générales de la nature humaine et de l'idée d'une révélation divine" ("De la révélation," 614; Tits' italics).

25. See Laforet, *La vie et les travaux d'Arnold Tits*, 207-210.

26. In what follows we will see that Perrone, the major representative of the so-called Roman School, and one of the most influential Catholic theologians of this period, sided with the opponents of Louvain in the controversy on traditionalism.

27. The defense of theses was an important part of exams on all levels: baccalaureate (STB), licentiate (STL) and doctorate (STD); every student had to defend a set of theses taken from all the disciplines of theology and canon law. All *theses quas* were printed and published, and certainly in the first decades they were considered to reflect the theology taught at the University of Louvain. See Kenis, *De Theologische Faculteit te Leuven in de negentiende eeuw 1834-1889*, 136-139. In our non-published dissertation with the same title (1989), we added a quantitative analysis of all STB-theses *quas* for the period 1834-1889 (vol. III, 198-219).

quality and number. Most of these theses (dealing with questions on human knowledge, certainty, faith, natural theology, the existence of God, religion and revelation, etc.) were composed by Tits himself or excerpted from his course. Obviously, the theses were formulated in sharp wordings, fitting as a starting point of a dialectical dispute. All this made these defences an effective means to promote the ideas of Tits among a generation of theology students at Louvain.

However, there was also resistance against these ideas, from the very beginning, and even within the theological faculty itself. The Louvain design of a traditionalist philosophy was immediately criticized and the critique focused on two viewpoints. The first bone of contention concerned the possibility of proving the existence of God. Since, according to the traditionalist Louvain thinkers, the idea of God is accepted by the human person in a primary, natural act of faith, God's existence cannot be demonstrated by means of an apriori argumentation (*demonstratio*), which argues independently from any external instance. The existence of God can only be proven by means of a *probatio*, an aposteriori construction, in which the primary knowledge of God, already present in the subject, is confirmed and explicated.

A second point of controversy related to the question of the so-called primordial or primal revelation. As all traditionalists, the Louvain thinkers held that knowledge of metaphysical and moral truths did not develop through an evolution in human history but was in principle given to every human person by a natural, non-reflective perception, conferred by an original, primordial revelation. For many theologians this postulate of a kind of natural primary revelation tended to undervalue the original capacities of reason and lead to conclusions that were similar to the errors of Baianism.

4. Controversies at the Faculty of Theology

Although, in Louvain, the critical reaction to traditionalist philosophy concentrated on the work of the philosopher Casimir Ubaghs, it was at the Faculty of Theology that relations were disturbed for many years. The conflict was based on a fundamental difference of opinion on the task and method of theology, and it put Arnold Tits in opposition with another leading professor at the faculty, Jean-Baptiste Malou.

From the beginning of their careers, both professors followed quite different paths, and this impacted on their later conflicts. Born in 1809, Malou was two years younger than Tits, and he descended from a

patrician family at Ieper (or Ypres, West-Flanders).²⁸ During the crisis of priestly education under William I, this background enabled him – in contrast to Tits – to go and study abroad, in France, at the minor seminary of Saint-Acheul near Amiens. From 1831 on, Malou continued his theology studies in Rome, at the *Collegium Romanum* (the later Gregorian University). From 1837 onwards, after his ordination to the priesthood and his promotion to doctor in theology (1835), he lectured dogmatic theology at Louvain University.

Malou was convinced, as were many of his ultramontane compatriots, that the University of Louvain, from its reestablishment, was under the bad influence of Lamennais and tainted with Liberal-Catholic ideas. He was determined to eradicate these ideas in the theological faculty and he did so by introducing there the philosophy and theology he had learned in Rome. As a handbook for his course on dogma he made use of the *Praelectiones theologicae* of his Roman teacher Giovanni Perrone, which he himself had published in a Louvain edition. Perrone was the leading figure of the so-called Roman School, practicing a pronounced form of ‘positive theology’. In this methodological option theology consisted of the explanation of Christian doctrine based on an elaborate study of Scripture and Tradition. It paid hardly any attention to what was known as ‘speculative theology’, the philosophical reflection on the possibility and significance of the doctrines of Christian theology. But according to Tits, precisely that philosophical reflection had become a crucial task for any theology.

Malou saw his plans disturbed when Arnold Tits was appointed in Louvain and, moreover, was assigned the new chair of general dogmatic theology, which meant that Tits was entitled to deal with the topical issues in philosophical-theological discussions. Tits made a resounding entrée in Louvain with a lecture to the *Société littéraire* of the University, in which he revealed his program of a Christian philosophy.²⁹ In this inaugural speech he repeated his critique on the pantheism of German idealist philosophy. Against this rationalist position he proposed an alternative principle, stating that the germ of human knowledge is naturally given and only

28. On Malou, see, next to literature mentioned below, Kenis, *The Louvain Faculty of Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, 155-162; an extensive treatment of the controversy between Tits and Malou is given in id., *De Theologische Faculteit te Leuven in de negentiende eeuw 1834-1889*, esp. 171-178.

29. A. Tits, “Théorie de la création, ou doctrine de la philosophie chrétienne sur Dieu et sur ses rapports avec le monde, comparée aux principes du rationalisme moderne,” *Société littéraire de l’Université catholique de Louvain: Choix de mémoires* 2 (1842): 1-53. The text was translated into German: *Schöpfungslehre, oder Theorie der christlichen Philosophie, über Gott und dessen Verhältniß zur Welt, verglichen mit den Grundsätzen des Rationalismus neuerer Zeit* (Aachen and Leipzig: Mayer, 1844).

needs an external stimulus to develop. For Tits, the superiority of Christian philosophy consists of its recognition that human thought and knowledge are based on a natural knowledge of God, not on the logical apriori's of thought. These basic principles of a Christian philosophy laid the foundation of what he was planning to teach at the Faculty of Theology.

As soon as Tits began this teaching, he had immediate success, but at the same time the controversy started. At the end of the academic year 1841-42, philosophical disagreements came to light at the occasion of the public thesis defenses that, as part of the yearly examinations, were organized simultaneously in the Faculty of Theology and in the study house of the Louvain Jesuits. Apparently, the opinions of the University and those of the Jesuits were diametrically opposite. Malou reacted promptly, but he did so behind the scenes because he preferred to stay outside of public controversy. He filed an extensive complaint with Rector De Ram, clearly indicating what the cause of the problem was.

According to Malou, the dispute was provoked by his colleague Arnold Tits. In controversial issues Tits time and again was inclined to take as a starting point of his reflections those opinions that were least suitable for the defense of faith, while leaving unutilized the proven arguments of Catholic theology. Tits' assimilation of German philosophy was superficial and dangerous for the teaching of theology, because it threatened to undermine the very foundations of the Christian faith. For Malou the reason for this lapse was obvious: Tits had an insufficient theological schooling and in many areas of theology his knowledge was substandard. To illustrate this, Malou quoted an example which reveals the mutual incomprehension that obfuscated their relation: when, during a discussion, Malou brought up the notion of *natura pura*, Tits hardly seemed to know the concept and simply dismissed it as a scholastic futility. Malou warned that the Faculty of Theology was getting internally divided by this controversy, which threatened the University of Louvain by running the risk of being accused of failing in the defense of religion.

In 1841 the question of Louvain traditionalism got focused on the works of Gerard Casimir Ubaghs, when he published his *Theodicea*, in which the traditionalist theory was developed. Immediately the book was sent to Rome for scrutiny. Meanwhile, in public discussion on the Louvain doctrine, friend and foe agreed that Arnold Tits was the inspirer and driving force of this group of thinkers. In 1848 Malou became Bishop of Bruges. He persistently continued opposing the traditionalist ideas of Tits and his colleagues. Soon he realized that in his new position as a bishop disciplinary measures would prove to be much more efficient than philosophical arguments.

5. The Controversy on “le Système de Louvain”

In this tense situation, Arnold Tits suddenly passed away on 9 July 1851. Two years later, Nicolas Laforet published his book on *La vie et les travaux d'Arnold Tits*, which he presented as an introduction to the *Œuvres* of the master. But the plan, set up by Tits' colleagues and students, to publish the *Theologia generalis* was forbidden by the bishops. Henceforth, the role of Tits as spokesman of the Louvain school was taken up primarily by his younger colleague Jean-Baptiste Lefebve, professor of special dogmatic theology. The discussions became more fierce. In addition, the relations between the University of Louvain and the bishops worsened, particularly after 1852, when Théodore de Montpellier, fellow student in Rome and kindred spirit of Malou, was named Bishop of Liège. Both bishops intensified their opposition against what they called “le Système de Louvain,” and they were most critical of the moderate policy of Archbishop Sterckx in this matter.

The conflict burst open in 1861, when both parties almost simultaneously made an appeal to Rome in view of settling the dispute. Four Louvain professors, Laforet, Ubaghs, Lefebve, and the biblical scholar Jan Theodoor Beelen, sent a letter to the Congregation of the Index, in which they specified their opinions and requested a judgment. This so-called *Exposé* was the first systematic explanation of the Louvain position and represented a moderate version of traditionalism.³⁰ At the same time, Bishop Malou mailed his so-called *Liber Memorialis* to Rome, the first of three dossiers, in which errors of various Louvain professors were assembled and a drastic intervention by the Holy See was urgently requested.³¹ In this dossier Malou explicitly opposed Tits, and to that end he recalled his objections of twenty years earlier. Now, Malou insisted on disciplinary measures, so as to put an end to the teaching of this new philosophy which, he argued, filled theology students at Louvain with arrogance and a spirit of insubordination. It sowed discord

30. The *Exposé* was the first and only common position expressed by the Louvain professors, in which they deviated from French traditionalism. It was published in *Revue catholique* 18 (1860): 193-219, in Latin original with French translation, and often reprinted, among others in *Acta Sanctae Sedis* 3 (1867): 283-288.

31. *De Traditionalismo Belgico ad SS. Dominum Pium PP. IX Liber Memorialis* (Brussels, 1860). See A. Franco, “La première réaction systématique dans l'épiscopat belge contre l'enseignement du traditionalisme à l'Université de Louvain: Commentaire et étude critique du *Liber Memorialis* de Mgr Malou,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 34 (1958): 453-495 (with publication of the first part). In this and later dossiers Malou frequently refers to erroneous opinions of Tits (especially in a listing of *Theses ex scriptis Traditionalistarum Belgii pleraeque ad verbum excerptae* [Brussels: Henri Goemaere, 1860]).

among the clergy, precisely at a moment when unanimous resistance against the enemies of the Catholic faith was urgently needed.

With these demarches from both sides the decisive battle in Rome on Louvain traditionalism was initiated. The specific issue, then, was about Louvain philosophy, and more specifically about the works of Ubaghs, but beyond that much more was at stake.³² In Rome, the investigation involved the usual rivalry and lobbying of groups and personalities. Within the Roman curia itself, the case caused a clash between competing congregations, which reflected the division of promotors and opponents of a more liberal policy in the Church. Eventually, it was the anti-Louvain faction that was declared right, and their victory profoundly changed the relations of power within the curia. With all this the actual subject of investigation, the works of Ubaghs, had become less important. The judgement on Louvain philosophy marked the conclusion of the real conflict, which was about the acceptance of diversity in developing a Christian philosophy, and it tightened up the limits of the freedom of doing theology within the Catholic Church.

The final decision was taken in March 1866. The Belgian bishops received from Rome the message that the works of Ubaghs still contained opinions that “could not be taught without danger.” They agreed that Ubaghs should resign and required from all professors to sign a written submission to all the previous condemnations issued by the Holy See. New handbooks had to be conceived according to the model of education in Rome and should in advance be submitted for approval to the bishops.

Ultimately, one final clash followed in 1870, in the aftermath of the Vatican Council. At the Council, with the Constitution *Dei Filius* an important text was approved dealing with the relationship between faith and reason.³³ In the preparatory discussions on this text the issue

32. An elaborate study on the Roman investigation is provided by Johan Ickx, *La Santa Sede tra Lamennais e San Tommaso d'Aquino: La condanna di Gerard Casimir Ubaghs e della dottrina dell'Università Cattolica di Lovanio (1834-1870)*, Collectanea Archivi Vaticani 56 (Vatican City: Archivio segreto Vaticano, 2005). See also Vincent Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See from Gregory XVI to Pius IX (1831-1859): Catholic Revival, Society and Politics in 19th-Century Europe*, KADOC-Studies 26 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2001), 419-437.

33. The discussions on traditionalism at Vatican I are extensively treated by Hötzel, *Die Uroffenbarung im französischen Traditionalismus*, 311-369, and Hermann-Josef Pottmeyer, *Der Glaube vor dem Anspruch der Wissenschaft: Die Konstitution über den Katholischen Glauben 'Dei Filius' des ersten Vatikanischen Konzils und die unveröffentlichten Voten der Vorbereitenden Kommission*, Freiburger Theologische Studien 87 (Freiburg, Basel and Vienna: Herder, 1968), esp. 168-204. See also our summary: Kenis, *De Theologische Faculteit te Leuven in de negentiende eeuw 1834-1889*, 359-367.

of traditionalism was treated, especially with regard to the question about the capacity of natural reason to attain knowledge of God. In the final text of the constitution the extreme traditionalist opinion was rejected, but a more moderate form of traditionalism did not seem to have been condemned. Shortly after the closure of the Council, in Belgium discord arose on the question whether the position of the Louvain professors was affected by *Dei Filius*. Again, this caused passionate discussions, which eventually became fatal for one theology professor. Jean-Baptiste Lefebve was repeatedly accused of sticking to traditionalist viewpoints. All these complaints originated from his colleague-dogmatician Ferdinand Ledoux, who, in 1862, was appointed in Louvain under pressure of the anti-traditionalist bishops. This time, the bishops took action: in July 1873 they forced Lefebve to tender his resignation.

6. The End of Traditionalism at the University of Louvain

These measures sealed the end of traditionalism at the University of Louvain. The theological faculty was practically silenced, internal tensions spoiled the atmosphere, while teaching and research suffered a real malaise (also occasioned by other reasons, such as a temporary decrease of the number of students). Lefebve was replaced by the Dutch philosopher Antoine Dupont, who is given the credit of having introduced Thomism in Louvain. One of his students was Désiré Mercier. The further course of the story is well known. In 1879 Pope Leo XIII issued the encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, which made the study of Thomas Aquinas mandatory in all institutions of ecclesiastical education. In 1880, the Pope instructed the Belgian bishops to inaugurate a new chair in the philosophy of Saint Thomas in the Louvain Faculty of Theology, which in 1882 they did after some insistence and without much enthusiasm. Mercier became the chair holder. Seven years later, in 1889, he established the *Institut Supérieur de Philosophie*, thus putting Louvain on the international scene as a center of Thomist philosophy.

In the Faculty of Theology this Neo-Thomism did not really contribute to the revival of teaching and research in dogmatic theology. During the final decade of the 19th century, a renewal was, actually, launched in the faculty, but only in biblical and historical studies. In biblical studies the methodology of historical-critical bible research was gradually adopted, in Church history new methods were introduced and new young professors were appointed. This renewal gave the faculty a

new fervor and marked a real turning point in its history.³⁴ For dogmatic theology, however, it would take some decades into the 20th century before a real vitality became noticeable. By then, the legacy of Arnold Tits had already disappeared from the faculty for a long time. But yet, there was one small signal of recollection. In 1908, Ernest Van Roey, a later Belgian archbishop who had been for some time a lecturer at the *schola minor* of the faculty, published a survey of the evolution of theology in Belgium since 1830. When mentioning Louvain, he noticed that at the Faculty of Theology people still remembered the memorable disputes of Jean-Baptiste Malou with his colleague Arnold Tits.³⁵ The quarrels still reverberated, yet the ideas were long since forgotten.

7. Concluding Remarks

I conclude with a number of reflections on the significance of Arnold Tits and the project of a traditionalist apologetics he introduced at the Louvain Faculty of Theology, within the larger context of the development of Catholic theology during the 19th century.

Louvain in the Evolution of 19th-century Catholic Theology

The story of Arnold Tits and other Louvain theologians can be considered representative for developments in Catholic theology in the 19th century. As far as I can see, among historians of theology there exists a rather great consensus about this evolution. It may be useful to briefly sketch this development – inevitably in much too broad outlines – with a focus on Western European Catholic theology. During the first decades of the century, in the aftermath of the Enlightenment, various Catholic theologians showed their willingness to engage in a positive discussion with contemporary thought with regard to the essential question of the relation between Christian faith and enlightened reason.

34. As is shown in the classic survey by Roger Aubert, “Le grand tournant de la Faculté de Théologie de Louvain à la veille de 1900,” in *Mélanges offerts à M.-D. Chenu, maître en théologie*, Bibliothèque thomiste 37 (Paris: Vrin, 1967), 73-109 (abbreviated English transl.: “The Turn of the Century: A Turning Point for the Faculty of Theology,” *Louvain Studies* 5 [1974-75]: 264-279).

35. “On se souvient encore, à la Faculté de théologie, des joutes mémorables qu’il [Malou] soutenait contre son collègue Tits.” E. Van Roey, “Les sciences théologiques,” in *Le mouvement scientifique en Belgique 1830-1905*, vol. 2 (Brussels: Société belge de librairie, 1908), 517. Further, he wasted no more words on Louvain traditionalism, this “syncrétisme bizarre” (516).

Especially in the German countries theologians attempted to create a new unity of faith and thought by critically adopting insights of the major philosophical systems of the time. These projects were more than merely a reaction, in most cases they were founded on the belief that only an appropriate reception of modern thought could provide an adequate conceptual framework to demonstrate convincingly the richness of Christian faith. The most famous center is the Catholic Tübingen School, which particularly attempted to integrate the dimension of history in theology. But different from such dialogue with modern thought – and often overlooked – there were other theological centers, especially, but not only, in Italy, where Catholic thinkers believed that the most effective strategy to preserve the persuasiveness of Christian faith consisted of holding on to the reliability of scholastic thought.

By the middle of the century, various new theological projects were condemned, and following the political crisis of 1848, under the pontificate of Pius IX, the aversion to modernity increased, expressed in strong anti-liberalism and a strengthening of the ultramontane current in the Catholic Church. Concomitantly, church authorities extended control and pressure on the freedom of a multiform practice of theology. The 1860s signaled an intensification of this process, visible in the *Syllabus of errors*, which rejected not only philosophical and political currents, but likewise some of the previously condemned opinions. But the crisis of theology was not only the consequence of the silencing of individual theologians. It was also occasioned by the absence of solid, mature theological syntheses. This created a kind of vacuum in Catholic theology, which towards the end of the century was filled by Neo-Thomism, the confirmation of the preference for scholastic theology that meanwhile was adopted by a significant number of Catholic theologians.³⁶ The return to Thomas Aquinas, it was thought, combined with an open approach to new scientific developments, was the best remedy against the excesses of modern thought.

This development, which is often characterized as a shift from openness to isolation, is visible in the story of the Louvain theologians and philosophers. Arnold Tits and his colleagues were convinced of the

36. Some authors even argued that Neo-Thomism can be considered as a continuation of (French) traditionalism. See Louis Foucher, *La philosophie catholique en France au XIX^e siècle avant la renaissance thomiste et dans son rapport avec elle (1800-1880)*, Bibliothèque de la société d'histoire ecclésiastique de la France (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1955), 237-264; followed by Pierre Thibault, *Savoir et pouvoir: Philosophie thomiste et politique cléricale au XIX^e siècle*, Histoire et sociologie de la culture 2 (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1972), 78-89, who calls Thomism a "traditionalisme amendé" (83).

necessity to engage in a critical but at the same time open dialogue with contemporary philosophy. This effort was immediately countered by opponents such as Jean-Baptiste Malou, who tenaciously stuck to the preservation of classic theology. In this reaction they were supported by ultramontane bishops (cooperating with the nuncios), who by means of disciplinary measures and condemnations succeeded in eliminating the promoters of renewal from their positions and introduced a uniform theological education, shaped on a Roman model. Louvain was typical for what happened elsewhere in the Catholic Church – not only in the removal of traditionalist philosophy, but even more in the return to Thomist thought, be it with an active integration of the sound results of modern science. For theology, the shift was of no real avail, as was shown at the end of the century, when suppressed ideas and theories resurfaced with the crisis of modernism.

The Significance of Louvain Traditionalism

In a second observation some considerations can be made on the question how Louvain traditionalism has been assessed by later commentators. It goes without saying that initially this judgment was negatively influenced by the introduction of Neo-Thomism. The majority of the first commentators on Louvain traditionalism were Neo-Thomists. They considered traditionalism as a rather superficial attempt to connect new ideas from contemporary philosophy with the classics of Catholic tradition. Here too, many of them attributed the failure of Louvain traditionalism to the lack of a solid, classic formation of authors such as Tits and Ubaghs.³⁷ But Tits and his like-minded colleagues had not assimilated modern philosophy just for lack of a traditional formation but because they were convinced that Catholic philosophy and theology were no longer capable of formulating an effective reply to modern critical thought. Only an open confrontation included the chance to provide convincing answers to new questions – questions for which the classic answers of Catholic tradition had become irrelevant.

In these circumstances the design of a traditionalist apologetics was a promising step, but eventually it was not realized because the construction lacked profundity and coherence. Also, it was distracted by external

37. Most commentaries follow the statement by J. Henry: “L’absence de tradition forte fit des professeurs de Louvain des traditionalistes.” J. Henry, “Le Cardinal Sterckx et la condamnation du Traditionalisme de Louvain,” *Collectanea Mechliniensia* 16 (1927): 202.

discussions on non-essential psychological issues or on problems such as the origin of language, or affected by historically burdened theological controversies. Eventually, for many the conclusion was that the traditionalist project was unable to fulfil the task of a Christian philosophy in the context of modern scientific evolutions. But doubtlessly this failure was just as much caused by the opposition Louvain traditionalists had to confront. From the very moment they engaged in developing their ideas, they were suspected, denounced and finally condemned. In such a situation, which continued for nearly four decades, it was impossible for them to construe a consistent and convincing philosophy, regardless of the potentialities and quality of the system they had in mind.

It is noteworthy that later some intuitions of this uncompleted traditionalist project were recognized as true. Moreover, such revaluation was precisely expressed by Désiré Mercier, the person who had definitely removed and taken the place of traditionalism at the University of Louvain. Initially, Mercier had dismissed traditionalism for being useless in the struggle against rationalism.³⁸ But later on, despite his fundamental critique, he recognized valuable elements in it, such as: the traditionalists' critique on the absolute autonomy of reason; their insight in the complexity of reality which is unattainable by means of mere abstractions; their conviction that human reason must essentially be considered in its social context and that without any external impulse reason remains incapable of achieving knowledge.³⁹ Later, Mercier also recognized the limitations of pure speculative reason and the need for the wisdom of the heart, faith and tradition.⁴⁰ And those insights, he had to admit, he gained from Pascal, Newman, the Kant of practical reason, but equally from "tous les traditionalistes,"⁴¹ and from contemporary thinkers such as Maurice Blondel...

38. In 1879, when he still taught at the minor seminary of Mechelen, Mercier had written the final verdict on Louvain traditionalism in a number of polemical articles. See Kenis, *De Theologische Faculteit te Leuven in de negentiende eeuw 1834-1889*, 459-460.

39. D. Mercier, *Critériologie ou Théorie générale de la Certitude*, 6th ed. (Louvain: Institut Supérieur de Philosophie, 1911), 123-157. See A. Simon, *Rencontres Mennaisiennes en Belgique*, Académie royale de Belgique: Classe des lettres et des sciences morales et politiques. Mémoires. Collection in -8°, 2nd ser. 56/3 (Brussels: Palais des Académies, 1963), 211-214.

40. See Simon, *Rencontres Mennaisiennes en Belgique*, 213 (a reflection in one of Mercier's "carnets intimes," written in 1924).

41. *Ibid.*

Traditionalism as Apologetic Theology

Mercier's recognition of the valuable insights of traditionalism leads us to a concluding reflection on traditionalism as apologetic theology. It is noteworthy that a reference to the combination of both is nearly absent in historical-theological literature. One of the very few authors who did notice the connection, was – surprisingly – Johann Baptist Metz, the recently deceased German theologian and 'father' of the new political theology (who, in his work, more than once opened up new perspectives for interpretation and reflection not only for fundamental theologians but for historians of theology as well). In Catholic theology it was Metz who emphasized the essentially apologetic character of any fundamental theology as foundational research. When reviewing the state of fundamental theology in the 19th century, Metz recalled the frantic struggle of the Catholic Church and its theology with the innovations of modernity.⁴² Most often Catholic theology reacted with condemnations of these ideas, and then, afterwards and too late, it painfully had to recuperate them. But Metz noticed that, possibly, in the apologetic stance of Catholic theology more was at stake than a reactionary nostalgia for pre-modern times. Perhaps, he argued, it is proper to a religion such as Christianity to display a certain "Ungleichzeitigkeit," a 'non-simultaneity' with regard to its surrounding culture.⁴³ Such non-simultaneity is no backwardness, but rather a spontaneous protest against uncritical conformism to predominant culture. Metz suggests that, during the 19th century, in Catholic apologetics, and precisely in the French philosophical traditionalism we are discussing here, such a protest was active "out of the right instinct of a conservative imagination."⁴⁴ It was traditionalism that criticized the bias of bourgeois culture, which was apparent in modern thought with its cult of autonomous, abstract reason and its transference of such rationality by equally abstract subjects.

42. Johann Baptist Metz, *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft: Studien zu einer praktischen Fundamentaltheologie* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1977), 18-28; we quote from the English translation, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, ed. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad, 2007), 31-45.

43. See Johann Baptist Metz, "Produktive Ungleichzeitigkeit," in *Stichworte zur 'Geistigen Situation der Zeit'*, ed. Jürgen Habermas, edition suhrkamp 1000 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1980), II: 529-538; ET: "Productive Noncontemporaneity," in *Observations on "The Spiritual Situation of the Age": Contemporary German Perspectives*, ed. Jürgen Habermas, *Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 169-177 (translating "Ungleichzeitigkeit" with "noncontemporaneity" seems to narrow the significance of the word).

44. Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 43.

Even if the critical voice present in these traditionalist projects was not or hardly productive, they should be recognized as genuine efforts to resist the seeming plausibilities of dominant culture. It is also clear that a theology such as the one undertaken by Arnold Tits c.s. was apologetic in the positive and critical sense the word should always have (and which, from the very beginning, has been constitutive for any Christian theology). By addressing contemporary thought in an open but equally critical manner, the Louvain thinkers engaged in an effort to show the legitimacy of Christian faith, and in so doing, they exposed latent ideological tendencies present in prevailing rationalist thought. In that sense they practiced theology as genuine apologetics: a foundation of Christian faith, in the midst of the times, that gives account of the meaningfulness of faith but just as well reveals its critical potentials with regard to the idols of the day. It might be useful, from our present perspective, to discern also this critical potentiality of a conservative current such as traditionalism, even if it was unable to make it effective in the actual conditions of its days.

Leo Kenis is emeritus professor of Church history and the history of theology at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven. Since 1996 he has been member of the editorial board of *Louvain Studies*, from 2013 to 2018 as Editor-in-Chief. From 2004 to 2018 he was academic librarian of the Maurits Sabbe Library. His research focuses on the history of Catholicism and Catholic theology in the 19th and 20th centuries. Among his recent publications, he edited, with Wim François and Lieve Watteeuw, *Manuscripts & Precious Books in the Maurits Sabbe Library, KULeuven* (2019), and, with Marc Lindeijer, *The Survival of the Jesuits in the Low Countries, 1773-1850* (2019). Address: Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, Charles Deberiotstraat 26 – box 3101, BE-3000 Leuven (Belgium). Email: leo.kenis@kuleuven.be.