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FALQUE ON CHRISTIANITY

Nikolaas Deketelaere

TEMPLE CONTINENTAL
PHILOSOPHERS FOR OUR TIME



Falque on Christianity

Nikolaas Deketelaere

Temple Continental

Philosophers for our Time, Book 5

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Editors' Introduction

Philosophers for Our Time is a new series of short books from the William Temple Foundation that aims to meet two connected needs.

First, within academic theology there is a growing interest in a range of Continental thinkers, prompted, not least, by the so-called 'theological turn' that has taken place in various strands of recent philosophy. And yet, these thinkers can seem to be esoteric, voluminous and sometimes even openly hostile towards religion. *Philosophers for Our Time*, therefore, aims to demystify some of these figures by providing accessible introductions to their work: synthesising their most important ideas, defining their key terms and explaining why their work is relevant to current theology.

Second, our societies and our planet are facing some unprecedented challenges at the present time: from populist politics and technology takeovers to spiritual stagnation and climate catastrophe. And, of course, we all need to address the sort of world that is to follow the coronavirus pandemic, the Me Too movement and the Black Lives Matter campaigns. The philosophers that we consider in this series all have something prescient or profound to say about one or more of these contemporary challenges. As such, each book focusses on an individual thinker and an individual topic in order to offer a focussed account, not just of the philosopher themselves, and what they might mean for theology, but also of what they can contribute to one of the key issues of our generation.

It is our hope that these new resources will encourage you to read some of these philosophers for yourself, as well as setting forth new thinking on some of the most urgent topics of our time.

Tim Howles, Series Editor

Tim Middleton, Assistant Editor

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Introduction

The so-called ‘return of religion’ in the philosophy of the final decades of the previous century, and the ‘theological turn’ of certain continental philosophers in particular, has been one of the most widely observed developments in the recent history of philosophy. It has, perhaps, first of all been of interest to theologians, who have found in recent continental philosophy a great variety of ready-made tools with which to renew their theology. In contrast, few have given as much thought to what remains philosophical in these engagements with the Christian theological tradition as the contemporary French philosopher Emmanuel Falque (born 1963). In doing so, he not only articulates a highly sophisticated conception of the relationship between philosophy and theology, but equally forges an original path through the borderlands of both disciplines that constitutes a bold new vision for what it means to be a Christian thinker today.

Indeed, what it means to be a Christian thinker *today*—in the secular societies and academic environments of Western Europe—can be understood as the central question Falque is incessantly trying to answer, both philosophically and personally. In a time when academic theology’s engagement with postmodern philosophy increasingly seems to produce a Christianity that is at odds with the world in which it plays itself out—and therefore risks sinking into insignificance by preaching to the converted (whether by way of a ‘God without being’, ‘radical orthodoxy’ or ‘Trinitarian ontology’¹)—Falque’s work serves as an admirable example of what it means to be a Christian thinker in a world that is not or no longer Christian, without either abandoning the Christian tradition that animates the movement of thought or

¹ For examples of these theological projects that speak only to a community of the faithful despite their liberal use of postmodern philosophy, see: Marion, *God Without Being*; Milbank, Pickstock and Ward (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy*.

denying the world that furnishes its questions. For that reason, it is the question of what it means to be a Christian thinker, within the context of philosophy and theology, and therefore of the meaning of Christianity itself, within modern society and culture, that will guide this short introduction to Falque's work.

I will proceed in three steps. First of all, I will situate Falque's person and work within the academic disciplines of philosophy and theology generally, as well as within the French intellectual landscape in particular. Second, I will give a broad overview of Falque's work, focussing in particular on the methodological underpinnings of his philosophy of Christianity. Finally, this framework will be applied to the question of what it means to be a Christian thinker today. Specifically, Falque's proposal will be contrasted with that of Henri de Lubac and Nikolai Berdyaev. I should also note here that I will pay little to no attention to Falque's substantial and significant work in phenomenological philosophy, and that I will even be eschewing phenomenological language altogether. This is due both to the limited scope of the present essay and the high degree of technicality involved in the French phenomenological debates—at times more 'French' than they are 'phenomenological'—in which Falque finds himself engaged. These technical developments are interesting in their own right, but do not serve our present purpose, which is to map the path through secular society and academia forged by Falque for the Christian thinker.

Chapter 1

Life: Situating Emmanuel Falque

1.1 Academic trajectory

Emmanuel Falque is both a remarkable thinker and an extraordinary man: reading his books, one cannot fail to notice the creativity and originality of his thinking; hearing him speak, one is immediately struck by his enthusiastic and energetic personality. His unique position within the contemporary French intellectual landscape is perhaps best summarised by his academic trajectory. Currently, he is Professor of Philosophy at the Catholic University of Paris, where he teaches courses in his three main areas of expertise: phenomenology, philosophy of religion, and the philosophy of the patristic and medieval periods. Geographically, that institution is only separated from the Sorbonne—where Falque did his doctoral work on the medieval scholastic theologian Bonaventure under the supervision of Jean-Luc Marion—by the Jardin du Luxembourg, but they are nevertheless worlds apart in the French intellectual imagination. Due to its Catholicism, the Catholic University of Paris is not even allowed to call itself a ‘university’ in France (going by Institut Catholique de Paris instead); and within the militantly secular French intellectual environment, it is not generally considered to be a leading or influential player in the philosophical debate. However, this says more about French culture than it does about the university, which has produced many notable scholars who have developed Heidegger’s philosophy in the context of the Christian religion—a tradition that Falque’s work arguably continues. Indeed, despite the so-called ‘theological turn’ of recent French philosophy, he is perhaps one of the few to ‘turn’ to theology in a respon-

sible way, which we should probably attribute to the fact that he—unlike many of his better-known colleagues—also holds a postgraduate degree in theology and is therefore more sensitive to the particularities of its logic and language.

1.2 Presentation and reception

It is this rather particular academic trajectory, at least in France, that accounts for how Falque's work presents itself and how it is usually received. First, as concerns its presentation, a cursory glance over his bibliography (including titles such as *The Wedding Feast of the Lamb: Eros, the Body, and the Eucharist*) might give the impression that he, as a philosopher and theologian working at a Catholic institution, is primarily theologically interested. Yet, even though Falque makes no apologies about his Catholicism and his books certainly make liberal use of theological language, that impression would be seriously mistaken: "I am," he rightly insists, "first and foremost a philosopher."¹ However, unless one reads him carefully and seriously, that mistake is easily—and, indeed, all too often—made. As a result, he is perhaps chiefly read outside of France, and especially in the United States (virtually all his monographs have been translated into English), where his work finds a hearing not primarily in faculties of philosophy, but amongst scholars working in theology and religious studies—which, in turn, has further contributed to the mistaken overemphasis of its theological aspects. Falque is nevertheless, relatively speaking, a clear and accessible writer. Though somewhat too deeply immersed in the particularities of the French debate, and certainly primarily addressing academic philosophers (as well as theologians), his writing is generally extremely didactic, lucid, and scholarly. Fortunately, as Falque has been reorienting his work towards general questions of phenomenology concerning the structure of experience and embodiment, and as new and younger scholars begin to engage with it, an autonomous and more rigorous reception of his work is nevertheless emerging.²

¹ Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon*, 25.

² For example, a first English-language edited volume on Falque's work appeared recently, see Koci and Alvis (eds.), *Transforming the Theological Turn*.

1.3 Position in contemporary French philosophy

Indeed, to understand Falque's independence from other prominent Catholic French philosophers, we should clarify his relationship to his former supervisor (Jean-Luc Marion) and to the intellectual movement he represents (the so-called 'theological turn' of French phenomenology). Marion is, of course, extremely well-known, both in France (as a philosopher), and in the English-speaking world (as a theologian). Amongst others, it was Marion's theory of the so-called 'saturated phenomenon'—namely, an experience that 'gives itself absolutely' on its own terms and of which the best example just so happens to be the revelation of Christ³—that led Dominique Janicaud to express concern at the apparent 'theological turn' being taken by French phenomenology in the 1980s and 1990s.⁴ A set of confessional philosophers, such as Marion and Emmanuel Levinas, were reconceiving the general philosophical analysis of experience (phenomenology) on the model of an analysis of religious experience (phenomenology of religion). Marion is in many ways an unparalleled philosopher, but his staunch—indeed, often reactionary and deeply uncritical—Catholicism occasionally gets in the way of his arguments. We may remember his infamous declaration that “*only the bishop merits [...] the title of theologian,*”⁵ or discover how often he appears to be engaged in a philosophical paraphrasing of the Catechism.⁶

In this respect, the student could not be more different from his teacher. In fact, Falque's entire project is perhaps most easily understood as a profound rejection of, or at least an alternative to, that of Marion. Indeed, we can trace the impetus for Falque's work to an exchange between Marion and Jocelyn Benoist, the latter's atheist colleague at the Sorbonne. Since the saturated phenomenon of revelation supposedly gives itself on its own terms and is therefore unconditionally given for all to see regardless of whether one has faith or not, Benoist asks Marion: “what will you

³ For its most succinct formulation, see Marion's *The Visible and the Revealed*.

⁴ See Janicaud, 'The Theological Turn'.

⁵ Marion, *God Without Being*, 153.

⁶ The most astonishing and concrete example of this is Marion's *The Erotic Phenomenon*, a book on love declaring anything that does not *de facto* correspond to the Catholic understanding of marriage to be a 'prostitution' of the very word 'love'. This is not only *theologically* uninteresting, but also *philosophically* inadequate insofar as it (dis)misses the reality of love.

say to me if I tell you that where you see God, I see nothing or something else?”⁷ To this fundamental challenge, Marion has no real answer: he is left suggesting that, in Benoist’s case, it might simply be “necessary to learn to see otherwise.”⁸ If Benoist sees things differently from Marion, the latter attributes this to the former’s personal unwillingness to recognise what is plainly given to be seen: the revelation of God. In other words, on Marion’s account, the atheist is not only obviously *wrong*, but their atheism also constitutes a profound exercise in *bad faith*, for it denies what is evidently given to be seen. Falque, however, recognises that this refusal to take the atheist’s objection seriously is not only unbecoming of a philosopher, but also constitutes an unproductive approach for a Christian thinker to adopt.⁹ This exchange threw a new light on Marion’s work for Falque, which allowed him to develop a highly critical perspective on both his former supervisor and the broader ‘theological turn’ he represents. It would therefore be wrong to consider Falque as himself belonging to the ‘theological turn’ that Janicaud criticises: he does indeed address theological issues philosophically but does so in a very different way than the protagonists of the ‘turn’. In fact, Falque’s approach has much more in common with that of Paul Ricœur or Jean-Yves Lacoste, both of whom Janicaud explicitly excludes from his critique precisely in virtue of their distinct methodological approaches.

⁷ Benoist, *L’idée de phénoménologie*, 102.

⁸ Marion, *The Visible and the Revealed*, 124.

⁹ Falque, *The Loving Struggle*, 100-101; *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, 33-36.

Chapter 2

Philosophy: Reading Emmanuel Falque

2.1 The horizon of finitude

What is this methodological approach that distinguishes Falque from those categorised as belonging to the ‘theological turn’? It can be summarised in a single word: *finitude*. Following Heidegger, finitude denotes the mortality that constitutes the humanity of the human being and therefore comprises the only experience shared by each and every human being in virtue of their humanity (regardless of whether they have faith or not): “I know myself and I feel myself to be finite, and not to admit this is a way of beating a retreat in front of an evident ‘fear of existence.’”¹ As a result, Falque suggests that the analysis of finitude provided by Heidegger’s *Being and Time* “should constitute the first chapter of any book of theology, as well as of philosophy.”² This distinguishes him from the authors of the theological turn, whose approach is characterised by a certain Cartesianism, or what Falque (following Janicaud) calls a “preemption of the infinite on the finite,”³ whereby the finite is always understood as derived from the infinite. Of course, for Descartes, it is the idea of

¹ Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, 13; *Crossing the Rubicon*, 22.

² Falque, *Parcours d’embûches*, 155.

³ Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, 16-19; *The Loving Struggle*, 104, 129; Janicaud, *La phénoménologie dans tous ses états*, 177.

God, already present in the human mind, that guarantees the human being's knowledge of the external world. Thus, Descartes says: "my perception of the infinite, that is God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, that is myself."⁴ Marion is a scholar of Descartes, and this logic indeed governs the entirety of his work as well, but it is perhaps most explicit in Levinas' famous analysis of the infinite: "my deepest thought, which carries all thought, my thought of the infinite, older than the thought of the finite."⁵ Consequently, Falque complains that the philosophies of Marion and Levinas contain "terms that say nothing *about* or *to* the human,"⁶ because they make an infinitude that is foreign to the human condition to be the criterion of all thought. Instead, Falque is interested not so much in God (the infinite), but in the human being (finitude), specifically what he calls "the human being as such" (*l'homme tout court*): namely, the human being understood on its own terms, "independent of the evidence that will be the revelation of God,"⁷ and thus without immediately placing humanity in relation to divinity by way of the theological notion of creation. In other words, Falque wants to think "finitude in its absolute positivity, without insufficiency or deficiency."⁸ Insofar as his philosophy operates entirely within this horizon of finitude, it thus maintains a strict methodological atheism. In fact, his method very closely resembles that of the atheist philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's "finite thinking," which likewise conceives of an "*absolute finitude*," namely "absolutely detached from all infinite,"⁹ where "finitude is not privation."¹⁰

2.2 Philosophy of Christianity as philosophical anthropology

We will consider why Falque attaches such great importance to the horizon of finitude in the next section, after having specified how it determines his work as a whole.

⁴ Descartes, *Meditations*, 36.

⁵ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, xiv.

⁶ Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon*, 122.

⁷ Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, 16.

⁸ Falque, *Parcours d'embûches*, 86.

⁹ Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, 27.

¹⁰ Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 29.

In virtue of its constant preoccupation with “the human being as such,” we should understand his project—despite its many theological sources and stated phenomenological ambitions—as one entirely concerned with *philosophical anthropology*: namely, answering the question of what it means to be human (anthropology), without this answer ever including a recourse to God (philosophy instead of theology). However, anyone approaching Falque’s work for the first time would be forgiven for failing to appreciate this, because what makes his approach so innovative is that he primarily sets out this philosophical anthropology over the course of three books containing highly technical analyses of the Easter Triduum: providing phenomenologies of the Passion (*The Guide to Gethsemane*), the Resurrection (*The Metamorphosis of Finitude*), and the Eucharist (*The Wedding Feast of the Lamb*). To the casual reader, the details of these individual books somewhat obscure the extent to which they should be read together as containing a single project with a distinctly philosophical aim, despite its theological means. In fact, to make evident how the three books do indeed constitute one ‘philosophical triduum’, they have been published together in a single volume in France (under the title *Triduum philosophique*).

What, then, makes these books philosophical as opposed to theological? It is because they are concerned, not so much with what happens to Jesus Christ in the Easter narrative, but rather with what these events tell us about what it means to be human. In other words, Falque’s concern is not so much theological (Christ’s divinity), but anthropological (Christ’s humanity as shared with us): the humanity *of God*, as an extreme example of the human condition (incarnate divinity), also reveals something *to us* about what it means to be human. In other words, for Falque, Jesus Christ is not only the revelation of divinity (the Word), but equally the revelation of humanity (the flesh), precisely by way of the Incarnation (the Word made flesh).

Specifically, the theological (or Christological) serves the philosophical (or anthropological) in the following way: the Passion demonstrates the extreme of a distinctly human *suffering and anxiety* (“my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” Matthew 26:38); the Resurrection demonstrates what it means for human beings *to be born and reborn* (“we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed,” 1 Corinthians 15:51); and the Eucharist provides the opportunity for understanding the human condition as an *embodied condition* (“this is my body,” Mark 14:22).

2.3 Philosophy and theology

One might suspect Falque of being a somewhat schizophrenic thinker: can he really maintain the methodological atheism required by the horizon of finitude whilst quoting both the Bible and papal documents? The answer is an enthusiastic *yes*, but perhaps only because his *Crossing the Rubicon* demonstrates it by providing one of the most rigorous and powerful conceptions of the relationship between philosophy and theology available. The title is a metaphor for how Falque understands what happens when philosophy encounters theology, as it does in his own work. Just like Caesar's act of crossing from one bank of the Rubicon to the other carried such grave consequences that nothing could ever be the same again, so too is thinking *transformed* by the philosopher's setting foot on the terrain of theology (or vice versa).

Falque captures the significance of the transformation of one discipline in its encounter with another in his so-called "principle of proportionality," which states that "the more we theologize, the better we philosophize."¹¹ This, too, is easily misunderstood by a casual reader: in no way is Falque suggesting that philosophy becomes a confessional enterprise. At all times, unlike many of his Catholic colleagues, he maintains a strict distinction between both disciplines, each of which has its own specific rigour. The philosopher's *crossing* of the border separating their field from that of the theologian never amounts to a *confusion* of the two disciplines; the philosopher never becomes a theologian themselves but always remains a foreigner in the strange land of theology, which has its own set of rules that to a certain extent always remain impenetrable. Nevertheless, as with all travel to foreign lands, these excursions can prove incredibly enriching upon our return: in calling upon philosophers to *theologise more*, Falque does not intend to make philosophy *more theological*, but instead calls upon philosophy to become *better philosophy*. In venturing beyond their own borders, the philosopher gains a clearer idea of where those borders are actually located; in seeing how thinking is done elsewhere, the philosopher comes to a better understanding of what makes their own way of thinking distinctive. For Falque, the transformation of philosophy by theology (i.e., "crossing" the Rubicon)

¹¹ Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon*, 147-152.

therefore always results in a *better* philosophy (that is, one that is more rigorously philosophical), rather than in a *more* theological philosophy (that is, confusing the two disciplines).¹²

Falque's philosophy of Christianity then constitutes an elaborate illustration of what can be achieved by this framework: how doing theology (that is, exploring Christ's suffering on the cross) results in better philosophy (that is, a more profound understanding of human suffering). This never amounts to the naïve introduction of theological terms into philosophical discourse,¹³ but consists rather in the inquiry as to what the philosopher can learn from them: "it is a question neither of simply philosophising, nor of exclusively theologising, but rather of making the language of theology pertinent" to the questions of philosophy.¹⁴ This enterprise should not be mistaken for an argument in support of Christian faith, like C. S. Lewis's apologetics; instead, Falque's philosophy handles Christian theology in the same way that Nancy's 'deconstruction' handles Christian culture or Bultmann's 'demythologisation' handles Christian scripture: namely, demonstrating the significance of Christianity outside its proper register. This does not mean that this exercise is *essential* to the philosophical enterprise or that the human condition can *only* be understood on the model of the humanity of Christ; Falque simply wants to indicate that theology, too, deserves to be recognised as one of the many disciplines capable of enriching philosophy without colonising it (alongside psychoanalysis, literature, mathematics, and others).

2.4 Phenomenology in history and application

Falque takes the same approach in his historical work on patristic and medieval philosophy: his two books in this area, *God, the Flesh, and the Other* (dealing with the Church Fathers) as well as *The Book of Experience* (dealing with the monastic theologians), contain incredibly innovative readings of the most significant Chris-

¹² See my 'Crossing without Confusing'.

¹³ Consider, for example, how Henry defines the objects of phenomenology in his *Incarnation*, 23: "Givenness; showing; phenomenalization; unveiling; uncovering; appearance; manifestation; and revelation. Yet (...) these key words for phenomenology are also (...) key terms for religion, or theology."

¹⁴ Falque, *Parcours d'embûches*, 104.

tian theologians in terms of the concerns of contemporary phenomenology (such as experience, embodiment, intersubjectivity, alterity, etc.). Here, too, the approach therefore makes clear that Falque is “first and foremost a philosopher,”¹⁵ namely: interested in the Christian tradition, not simply for its own sake, but insofar as it provides us with the tools for tackling certain phenomenological problems. These problems are tackled in a more direct way by Falque in two books dealing primarily with phenomenological methodology: *The Loving Struggle*, which collects his critical essays on various French phenomenologists, and *Hors phénomène*, which sets out his own original framework systematically from the perspective of what remains “extra-phenomenal”. This framework then finds application in two shorter essays, one dealing with the body in the context of palliative care (‘Toward an Ethics of the Spread Body’) and the other providing a philosophical reading of Freud (*Nothing to It*). Insofar as all these texts are primarily concerned with phenomenology, rather than with a philosophical reappropriation of Christian doctrine, they do not concern us here. Though not yet translated into English, Falque’s *Parcours d’embûches* nevertheless deserves a mention as it will be particularly useful: providing his “intellectual autobiography” by way of responses to various objections, it contains the most accessible articulation of his philosophy of Christianity, as discussed earlier.

¹⁵ Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon*, 25.

Chapter 3

Christianity: Believing Emmanuel Falque

Why does Falque feel it is worthwhile to read Christian doctrine (Passion, Resurrection, Eucharist) in terms of philosophical anthropology (suffering, birth, body)? The answer is: because he is a *Christian* thinker. His philosophical anthropology responds to the imperative with which Pope John XXIII opened the second Vatican Council, namely that Christian doctrine “should be studied and expounded through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern thought.”¹ However, with his conception of “the human being as such” and the methodological atheism it implies, Falque’s philosophy does so in a somewhat unusual way. It represents a new and innovative kind of Christian thinking and proposes a new way for the Christian to approach atheism.

3.1 Atheist humanism according to the theologian

Neither the question of atheism, nor that of the human being as such, are new to Christian theology. In France especially, Henri de Lubac’s 1945 *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* remains an important point of reference. The book translates the analysis proposed by the Russian Orthodox thinker Nikolai Berdyaev’s 1924 *The*

¹ Pope John XXIII, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* (Opening Speech to the Second Vatican Council, 11/10/1962), §15; Falque, *The Wedding Feast of the Lamb*, xiii; *Parcours d’embûches*, 43.

End of Our Time into the Western theological register. Both observe an “immense drift” of European thought: “through the action of a large proportion of its foremost thinkers, the people of the West are denying their Christian past and turning away from God.”² The thinkers referred to here are the 19th century philosophers who cleared the way for 20th century atheist humanism: Comte (positivism), Nietzsche (nihilism), as well as Feuerbach and Marx (materialism). Their atheism is perhaps best summed up by Feuerbach’s famous formula “*homo homini deus est*”: the human being is the god of human beings, for all the perfections we traditionally ascribe to God are in fact misappropriated perfections of humanity itself.³ This, according to de Lubac and Berdyaev, is a profound intellectual misunderstanding with seemingly undeniable and disastrous societal consequences—we must remember that the former was writing his book in the midst of the devastation of the Second World War, whilst the latter was writing shortly after being expelled from Russia. As a result, de Lubac summarises, the story of atheist humanism “is a dramatic one,” namely “the great crisis of modern times [...] which takes its outward course in disorder, begets tyrannies and collective crimes, and finds its expression in blood, fire and ruin.”⁴

The theological diagnosis of modern culture and its atheist humanism provided by de Lubac and Berdyaev is twofold. First, de Lubac observes, modern atheism is something entirely new: it is not the critical atheism, operated as an intellectual exercise, that the history of thought is so familiar with, but a positive vision of human existence that is advanced as an alternative to Christianity.⁵ He explains: “it is not the intelligence alone that is involved. The problem posed was a human problem—it was *the* human problem—and the solution that is being given to it is one that claims to be positive. Man is getting rid of God in order to regain the possession of the human greatness that, it seems to him, is being unwarrantably withheld by another. In God he is overthrowing an obstacle in order to gain his freedom. Modern humanism, then, is built upon resentment and begins with a choice. It is [...] an ‘antitheism’.”⁶ In other words, for de Lubac, atheist humanism is an attempt to

² Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 11.

³ See chapter 27 of Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity*.

⁴ Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

claw back the freedom and greatness that naturally belongs to humanity but was mistakenly ascribed to God: it is a militant act of opposition and revolt (*against* God and Christianity).

Second, according to the theologians, this new form of atheist humanism rests on a tragic misunderstanding: the greatness and freedom of the human being that humanism exalts are in fact traces of the image of God in humanity; the rejection of God is therefore the rejection of the humanity of the human being and thus the ultimate destruction of humanism itself. “Humanism itself got its humanness from Christ,” Berdyaev insists, “but the development of Humanism separated mankind from God and at the same time itself turned against man to destroy his image, for he is made in the image and likeness of God. [...] The spiritual centre of human personality is again lost. *Humanism’s turning against man is the tragedy of modern times.*”⁷ Or again: “he wanted to free himself—by shaking off that divine grace which had gone to the making of his own image and which spiritually fed him. Abstract humanism is a breaking-away from and a denial of grace, whereas life is concrete only in grace, outside it is abstract. All the illusions of humanism begin here.”⁸ De Lubac bemoans this “destruction of humanism by its own self,”⁹ namely insofar as it is a “humanism which breaks with Christianity,”¹⁰ in similar terms: “exclusive humanism is inhuman humanism,”¹¹ for it achieves precisely “the annihilation of the human person.”¹²

⁷ Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, 60.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹ Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 14.

¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

3.2 Atheist humanism according to the philosopher

Remarkably, in their respective discussions of atheism, these two theologians apparently never feel the need to provide an actual argument for why the separation of the human condition from divine grace would constitute an annihilation of its very humanity. Admittedly, de Lubac elsewhere provided an elaborate dogmatic argument against the idea of a “pure nature,”¹³ or what Falque would call “the human being as such” (that is, detached from God), which certainly continues to provide the basis for any Catholic theological anthropology. It is Berdyaev, however, who probably gives the game away in the final line of his essay: “*in the name of the Christian idea of man* we must burn away the idolatry and superstitions of a lying and destructive Humanism.”¹⁴ It is thus only *from within the Christian perspective* that it makes sense to say that “man without God is no longer man.”¹⁵ Yet, these Christian thinkers, in taking recourse to a dogma of the Christian faith in order to reject atheism, thereby demonstrate that they in fact have nothing to say to the atheists they are condemning, nothing to offer those who do not share their faith. Like Marion’s dismissal of Benoist’s objection, the conversation between the Christian and the atheist presupposes that the atheist first recognises their inability to see divine grace as a “tragic misunderstanding” on their part.¹⁶ The conversation, in other words, is not one between equals.

Falque is a very different kind of Christian thinker, for he realises that this is not a productive approach for the Christian to take *today*: “the supposed certitude of Christianity as a stance of belief for many Christians corresponds then to the no less striking obviousness of atheism, as an existential stance, for many of our contemporaries. The legitimacy of one (the believer) cannot be said to hold the field at the price of a condemnation of the other (the atheist).”¹⁷ Consequently, his project is not a theological anthropology (the human being viewed in relation to God), but

¹³ Lubac, *Surnaturel; The Mystery of the Supernatural*.

¹⁴ Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, 65 (my emphasis).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 54; Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 65.

¹⁶ Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 19.

¹⁷ Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, 34.

a philosophical one (the human being viewed as such). Falque is an unashamedly Christian thinker, but his thinking emerges from the recognition that—certainly in Western Europe—the “spiritual battle” to which de Lubac refers has largely been lost: atheism is a sincerely-held position by many of his friends, family, and colleagues, who must therefore be taken seriously in their atheism. Indeed, Falque has the greatest respect for “our contemporaries who are capable of living authentically without God.”¹⁸ According to him, the Christian thinker must be able to speak to those who do not share the faith as well, and therefore must find a basis other than faith on which to speak. Falque’s philosophical anthropology of the “human being as such” within the horizon of finitude then serves to secure that basis, namely “the common pedestal”¹⁹ formed by the “common humanity”²⁰ shared by both believers and atheists. In other words, Falque does not simply want to talk *of* atheists; he wants to talk *to* atheists, meeting them where they are so that mutual understanding might follow.

In its methodological assumptions, Falque’s philosophy should therefore be seen as a complete rejection of de Lubac’s theology: both its account of human nature (never “pure”) and atheism (always ending in a “drama”). In fact, Falque’s intentions are made evident in *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, whose “précis of finitude” opens with a quote from Feuerbach as an author the book urges us always to “remember.”²¹ However, this rejection is not a refutation of de Lubac’s argument, but simply a recognition of the fact that it is no longer meaningful *today*: “what was pertinent in the 1950s following Henri de Lubac is no longer pertinent in the same way in the 2000s.”²² Falque explains succinctly: “different situation, other conceptuality,” stemming from the need “to recognise that the common pedestal can no longer be updated in the same way,” which means that we must abandon any approach starting from a supposed “immediate aspiration towards God,” for it turns out to be factually incorrect.²³ Today, it will not do to simply condemn the atheist: times have changed,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁹ Falque, *Parcours d’embûches*, 97; *Crossing the Rubicon*, 78.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 43; *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, 14; *Crossing the Rubicon*, 99.

²¹ Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, 34.

²² Falque, *Parcours d’embûches*, 43. This approach is inspired by Lacoste’s ‘Henri de Lubac and a Desire beyond Claim’, an incredibly insightful essay on how to read de Lubac *today*.

²³ *Ibid.*, 97.

and therefore the way in which we think must also change—which is, of course, a recognition of the principle governing the Catholic tradition that “eternal truth only articulates itself absolutely and paradoxically in the changing of the times.”²⁴

We may start with the question of atheism, so as to understand why it returns Falque to that of the human being. He rejects de Lubac’s characterisation of atheist humanism as born out of resentment and taking the form of an antitheism: instead of going “directly from the ‘nontheism’ that exists in philosophy as elsewhere to the pure and simple negation of God in an ‘antitheism’ or militant atheism,”²⁵ we should recognise “a new mode of being of atheism (the surpassing and the relinquishing of God, rather than a combat with God).”²⁶ In other words, the spiritual battle de Lubac was fighting has been lost: to many contemporary atheists, the spiritual dimension has simply ceased to mean anything; they are not so much against God (anti-theism), as they simply no longer have a need for God (a-theism). Today, most atheists are not obsessed with disproving the existence of God (as represented by Richard Dawkins’s rather infantile version of atheism); instead, they think very little about God, whom they have no use for: they are “non-theists” in that they apparently manage to “live” meaningful and authentic lives “‘without’ God.”²⁷ The “new age of religion”²⁸ Berdyaev predicted never came to pass, and the intellectual atheism of the 19th and 20th centuries has become the default societal position in the 21st century without apparently dramatic consequences. Atheism as Nietzsche described it, namely something self-evident that goes without saying and requires no argument, has become widespread: “I have no sense of atheism as a result, [...] for me it is an instinct.”²⁹

For Falque, the Christian thinker should not condemn this way of living without God, nor reinterpret it as actually meaningless, but rather reckon with the fact of its authenticity: for the Christian, contemporary “atheism is less an obstacle than a challenge,”³⁰ since it calls for “the ‘transformation of the self’ rather than the

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁵ Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, 33; *Crossing the Rubicon*, 90.

²⁶ Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, 35.

²⁷ Falque, *Parcours d’embûches*, 97.

²⁸ Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, 58.

²⁹ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 85.

³⁰ Falque, *Parcours d’embûches*, 33.

‘conversion of the other’.”³¹ In other words, the Christian should not approach the atheist—perfectly content in their atheism and rarely bothering anyone with it—in order to explain how their life is in fact devoid of meaning; instead, the Christian should see this possibility of existing authentically without God as a way of rearticulating their Christianity on the basis of the common pedestal of a shared humanity: “there will then be no drama of atheist humanism, no resigned or despairing apprehension of a world definitively going astray. There will simply be a question addressed to both the philosopher and the theologian [...]. Does atheism [...] have something to say to Christianity?”³² This is a radical reversal that sets Christian thought on a new, distinctly contemporary, basis: the common pedestal of a shared humanity understood as absolute finitude.

This is, of course, a controversial approach for a Christian thinker to take (a theologian is certainly unlikely to ever agree with Falque as a matter of Christian dogmatics). However, Falque is quick to remind his reader that, as a Christian thinker, he is a philosopher before all else and therefore operating according to different standards than a theologian would: indeed, in this case, “contemporary philosophy,” he says, must revisit “what Catholic theology had thought already settled.” He explains: “although it is absolutely *invalid from a dogmatic point of view*, insofar as it rejects divine creation, the conjecture of a ‘pure nature’ retains here nonetheless a certain heuristic value. Human beings were not created without grace, but all the same we find ourselves first in nature (or better in finitude)—that is to say, independent of the evidence that will be the revelation of God. In this respect we return to our own humanity along with all those of our contemporaries who are capable of living authentically without God.”³³

Falque justifies this approach with two arguments, one philosophical and the other theological. Philosophically, the discussion between the atheist and the Christian must be one between equals, meaning that the atheist position cannot be declared invalid from the start: “one cannot *from the start* require of one’s interlocutor that they first see invisible phenomena. No one is obligated to see what one sees for oneself, and we cannot regret that they do not see it if we do not from the start accept to be

³¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

³² Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, 35 (translation modified).

³³ *Ibid.*, 16.

transformed by them. We thus recognise a ‘possibility of not believing’ as also part of the human condition, in the simple sense that the human being ‘without God’ (non-theism) is not necessarily ‘against God’ (atheism or anti-theism).” Theologically, the structure of the Christian religion itself demands an approach starting from the human being as such: “God made man (*homme*), so the motif of the incarnation, justifies precisely that we start first of all from the human being (*homme*).”³⁴ Thus, Falque justifies his absolute insistence on finitude, to the exclusion of all reference to the infinite, as follows: “finitude gives itself as an absolute point of departure, not just in virtue of modernity, but also and first of all because God, in his kenosis, became incarnate.”³⁵

3.3 The credibility of Christianity

What, then, is the task of a Christian thinker—be they a philosopher or theologian? We saw how Falque rereads Christian doctrine (Passion, Resurrection, Eucharist) in terms of how it allows us to better understand the finitude of the human condition (suffering, birth, body). We also saw how Falque therefore understands this finitude as the common pedestal shared between atheists and believers, namely the human condition understood on its own terms. He describes it as follows: “impossible immanence as opposed to any supposition of an immediate opening up to transcendence, the avowal of a finite temporality as opposed to its impossible derivation from an eternity of some kind, and the recognition of the *possible depth of man without God*—all these are characteristic features of such a concept of finitude. The believer, like everyone else, will come to question ‘man, simply man’ at the risk of losing—in a supposed aspiration to the divine—what constitutes his shared humanity.”³⁶ In other words, the Christian thinker, too, must establish the possible significance and validity of the human condition’s absolute finitude, for it is only in terms of this finitude that Christianity can be made meaningful to human beings. If the Christian thinker fails to do so, not only will Christianity sink into insignificance because it can no

³⁴ Falque, *Parcours d’embûches*, 88.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 91. It must be pointed that Falque operates an understanding of the Incarnation that is itself very much up for theological debate. An alternative understanding can be found, for example, in Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity*.

³⁶ Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, 14.

longer speak meaningfully to the modern world, but also the conditions under which God can address Godself to *us human beings* will also be eroded. In reference to the Eucharist, Falque expresses this by way of a distinction between the ‘believability’ and ‘credibility’ of Christianity or any particular piece of Christian doctrine: “if we come, then, to a certain form of confessionalism, we must take care to ensure that *hoc est corpus meum* is not simply the prerogative of Christianity. The dogma of the eucharist is not just something for the believer (in giving us faith); it is also ‘credible’ (with a universal rationality). And thus in the present book I hope to address *all* readers. The formula *this is my body* is not simply one of conviction, but also one of ‘culture,’ or of pure and simple humanity.”³⁷ Christianity, in other words, does not only speak to the faithful on the basis of their faith; it can be meaningful *to any human being* precisely because what is at issue in Christianity (Passion, Resurrection, Eucharist) are *essentially human experiences* (suffering, birth, body). If this were not the case, Christianity would have neither credibility nor significance, for there would be no way for God to address Godself to human beings, including the faithful (who are never “extracted from humanity per se”).³⁸ In this way, Falque’s philosophy of Christianity, in the form of a philosophical anthropology, seeks to secure the ‘credibility’ of Christianity by “recalling the philosophical pertinence of theological concepts as such so that God himself can make use of our human language to talk to us.”³⁹ It establishes the common pedestal of a humanity shared between the believer and the atheist on the basis of which all Christian thinking must proceed, precisely because humanity is likewise the condition we share with God and the basis on which God addresses Godself to us: “we need to see in God how he makes himself the measure of human beings (*kenosē*), and how he marks out a route for us toward the divine, starting from the human. Today as yesterday, I have no other route to God except by means of the person I am. And Christ, ‘having lived our condition of humanity in all things except sin,’ teaches me first to look at myself in my humanity in order to reach *him* in his divinity.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Falque, *The Wedding Feast of the Lamb*, 43; *Parcours d’embûches*, 46.

³⁸ Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon*, 99.

³⁹ Falque, *Parcours d’embûches*, 104.

⁴⁰ Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, 6; *Crossing the Rubicon*, 122.

Consequently, as a philosopher, Emmanuel Falque might reject de Lubac's theological condemnation of atheist humanism; however, as a Christian, he at least shares with him the same understanding of what is at stake: "it is a *spiritual* problem. It is the human problem as a whole."⁴¹ If de Lubac wrote his stern book out of the urgent necessity for the Christian to "take cognizance of the spiritual situation of the world in which they are involved," by recognising that "even at their most blasphemous" the atheists "advance criticisms whose justice he is bound to admit,"⁴² then Falque's project certainly continues de Lubac's even if it does not reach the same conclusions—indeed, *it cannot do so today*. He is therefore a prime, and distinctly *contemporary*, example of how de Lubac conceives of the ethos of the Christian thinker, namely that "the faithful soul is always an open soul," without ever losing its "confidence in the resources of our Christian heritage."⁴³ Or, as Falque himself puts this: "we must 'think as Christians and live as philosophers', which means daring to address properly theological concepts—to think as a Christian—by translating them philosophically in order to speak precisely of and to basic human experience, the mode of our humanity *as such*—to live as a philosopher."⁴⁴

⁴¹ Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 113; Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, 62.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 112.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴⁴ Falque, *The Loving Struggle*, 251.

Questions for further consideration

- To what extent is Falque's account of the human condition convincing?
- To what extent is Falque's account of the human condition useful to the Christian thinker?
- To what extent is Falque's concern about maintaining the 'credibility' of Christianity justified?
- To what extent does Falque's emphasis on the humanity of Christ come at the cost of Christ's divinity?
- To what extent does Falque's account of the relationship between philosophy and theology risk turning philosophy into a confessional enterprise?
- What is the salience of Falque's metaphor of "crossing the Rubicon" for the "transformation of philosophy by theology (and vice versa)" that he conceptualises? Is it appropriate?
- Is confessional philosophy an impossible enterprise?
- What is a suitable approach for a Christian thinker to take today?
- Is there a difference between being a 'Christian thinker', or even a 'Christian philosopher', and a 'theologian'?
- In what sense is atheism a 'challenge' for the Christian thinker today?
- What is the value of theology for philosophy?

Glossary

Crossing the Rubicon: The act by which the philosopher ventures beyond the boundaries of their own discipline by stepping on the terrain of the theologian, accomplishing a transformation of philosophy. This act of crossing should in no way be mistaken for the confusion of either discipline, or the blurring of their respective boundaries.

The human being as such (*l'homme tout court*): The human condition understood on its own terms, namely as absolute and positive finitude, rather than in terms of a presupposed God-relationship, namely as created and therefore dependent on a creator. This understanding is justified both by the philosophical implications of our modernity (atheism) and the theological structure of the Christian religion (incarnation).

Credibility (of Christianity): The way in which Christianity, or a particular piece of Christian doctrine (Passion, Resurrection, Eucharist), is intelligible not just on the basis of faith, but on the basis of a humanity shared between those who believe and those who do not (the human experiences of suffering, birth, and embodiment). In other words, the significance Christianity has for every single human being in virtue of their humanity, rather than its significance for the believer in virtue of their faith. The latter concerns the 'believability' of Christianity, to be distinguished from its 'credibility'.

Common pedestal: The humanity shared between the believer and the atheist, like it is shared on a higher order level between all human beings and God, which should form the foundation for all thinking, whether Christian or not, whether theological or philosophical. It is this common pedestal of a shared humanity that guarantees the 'credibility' of whatever is articulated on its basis.

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