

***From Royalism to the Mystical Body of Christ: The Interwar Revolution in French Catholic Political Theology***

*Sarah Shortall*

*University College, Oxford*

**Bio**

Sarah Shortall is an intellectual historian of modern Europe, with a particular interest in the relationship between religion and politics in modern France. She completed her PhD at Harvard University in 2015 and now holds the Sanderson Junior Research Fellowship in History at University College, Oxford. She is currently completing a book manuscript titled *Soldiers of God in a Secular World: The Politics of Catholic Theology in Twentieth-Century France*, based on her dissertation, which was awarded the Harold K. Gross Prize. Beyond this project, her research explores the history of science, secularization theory, human rights, and the global history of religion, and has appeared in *Past & Present* and *Modern Intellectual History*. In September 2017, Sarah will take up an appointment as Assistant Professor of modern European history at the University of Notre Dame.

**Abstract**

This paper is a condensed draft of the second chapter of my current book manuscript. It traces the revolution in Catholic political theology occasioned by the 1926 papal condemnation of the Action Française—the royalist movement that had dominated Catholic politics in France since the separation of Church and state in 1905. The chapter shows how this condemnation broke the politico-theological alliance between Neo-Scholastic theology and royalist politics, opening the way for new political and theological alternatives no longer bound to the goal of restoring the confessional state. The result was a new form of social activism known as “Catholic Action,” which sought to incarnate Catholic values in the temporal order without engaging in party politics. Through it, the focus of the Church shifted from the threat posed by republicanism to the threat posed by communism and Nazism. This chapter focuses in particular on the new theology of the Church (ecclesiology) that supported this model of Catholic activism and was developed by a group of Jesuit and Dominican theologians led by Henri de Lubac. These theologians figured the Church as the mystical body of Christ, and as the only collective body capable of overcoming the twin excesses of liberal individualism and totalitarian collectivism. Refusing secular definitions of the political, of sovereignty, and of the distinction between the private and public spheres, I argue that this ecclesiology constitutes a “counter-politics”—a way of accessing questions traditionally classified as “political” while engaging in a critique of politics itself.