A CRITIQUE OF JOHN MILBANK'S *THEOLOGY AND SOCIAL THEORY*

by

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Abstract

My purpose in writing this thesis is to critique John Milbank's claims in *Theology and Social Theory* (1990), which are to the effect that secular social theory is founded upon religious principles, which if true, opens the possibility of a theological critique of secularism from a Christian perspective. The method by which I shall do this is by extracting the main lines of his thought while subjecting them to critical remarks by others and myself where necessary. *Theology and Social Theory* will be the main text for exegeting Milbank, but some of his other writings will be engaged when applicable, and the writings of the people he interacts with will be used to flesh out and corroborate Milbank's account. My conclusion is that Milbank has made an important contribution to contemporary theology because he forcefully shows that Christian theology can reassert itself as an intellectually respectable discipline capable of providing its own understanding of reality and its own solutions to problems of contemporary life.

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I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Dr. William H. Brackney for both introducing me to John Milbank's writings and the useful comments, remarks and engagement through the learning process of this MA thesis. I would like to thank my loved ones, especially my wife Kelley, who have supported me throughout entire process. This thesis would never have been completed without your help. I will be grateful forever for your love.

To Rob,

who first inspired me to study theology and philosophy

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

British Anglican theologian John Milbank is the Professor of Religion, Politics, and Ethics at the University of Nottingham, and the director of the Centre of Theology and Philosophy also at the University of Nottingham. Milbank grew up in the countryside of Gloucestershire in a Methodist household. He was educated at Oxford University and Cambridge University, the latter in which he studied under Rowan Williams. He received a PhD from Birmingham University after completing a dissertation on the works of Giambattista Vico, which was supervised by Leon Pompa. He previously taught at the Universities of Virginia, Cambridge and Lancaster (UK). He is married to Alison Milbank who is a minister of the Church of England and also a professor at the University of Nottingham. They have two children.

Milbank is known as the founder of the theological movement known as Radical Orthodoxy. Rupert Shortt summarizes Milbank's thought when in an interview with him he says, "Close to the heart of Radical Orthodoxy lies the immodest, but in your [Milbank's] view vital, belief that Christian thought has to give a plausible and self-confident account of the whole world… Unless theology can evoke a coherent universe in which other things fit, then it becomes a dreary kind of

ecclesiastical housekeeping."[1] The question of course is how one does this in a

highly secular climate. The basic argument is that in medieval scholasticism a great

and unfortunate shift occurred in which the doctrine of God changed radically,

which led to very different understandings of God, creation, and God's relation to

the latter. These changes led to the invention of modern secularism. Thus, Milbank

seeks to retrieve the earlier traditions, using them to construct an alternative vision

of reality to secularism. To put this crudely, yet not incorrectly, for Milbank,

secularism is predicated upon "bad theology".[2] Once this is understood, one can go

back to good theology and fix the mistakes of modernity. While this certainly

oversimplifies many complex issues, it does in fact catch the gist of Milbank's

thought.[3]

Theology and Social Theory was the book that laid the theoretical foundations

for Radical Orthodoxy with many of Milbank's later writings (along with many other

authors) building upon these foundations.[4] In a nutshell, *Theology and Social Theory*

is Milbank's clarion challenge to secular social theory in which he argues that

secularism, and its God-child nihilism, are merely theologies in disguise, not

discourses that are somehow more fundamental than the category of theology. This

opens up a space for theology to reassert itself as a discipline that has something to

say to the world that is intellectually respectable.

The Word Made Strange is Milbank's continuation of this theme, in which he

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[1] Simon Oliver and John Milbank. *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader.* (London: Routledge, 2009.) 28
[2] *Ibid.*, 28-29
[3] Milbank responds to this saying, "I think your report touches on the heart of what we're concerned
[3] Milbank responds to this saying, "I think your report touches on the heart of what we're concerned
with." *Ibid.*, 29
[4] James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology.* (Grand Rapids,
MI: Baker Academic, 2004.) 33-34

emphasizes the theological category of Word (logos), which leads much of the book's content into extending the theological concept of participation (explained below) so that it applies to language, culture and the liturgical performance of truth. Milbank sees himself as writing from a traditional Christian perspective. As he writes, "perhaps the most surprise, the most shock, should arise when what is said is really most orthodox and ancient, since the tradition is rarely re-performed in practice today."[5] *Being Reconciled* is the sequel to *The Word Made Strange*. In this work, Milbank approaches theology from the transcendental (not transcendentalist) perspective of the gift. This is because, as Milbank so very helpfully summarizes, understanding theological categories as gifts can be beneficial. He writes,

> Creation and grace are gifts; Incarnation is the supreme gift; the Fall, evil and violence are the refusal of gift; atonement is the renewed and hyperbolic gift that is for-giveness; the supreme name of the Holy Spirit is *donum* (according to Augustine); the Church is the community that is given to humanity and is constituted through the harmonious blending of diverse gifts (according to the apostle Paul).[6]

Observing the trajectory of Milbank's thought after *Theology and Social Theory* is helpful for understanding this prior work, for it helps highlight that the many details are unified into the larger project of building an erudite Christian alternative to secular social theory.

Milbank has written other books on topics such as Henri de Lubac, Thomas Aquinas, Giambattisto Vico, and Continental philosophy. He has also written shorter works that appear in such journals as *Modern Theology*, *First Things*, and *New Blackfriars*. An account of Milbank's works would be incomplete if one did not

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[5] John Milbank. *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture*. (Cambridge, MA:Blackwell Publishers, 1997) 1
[6] John Milbank. *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*. (London: Routledge, 2003) ix

mention *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* which appeared in 1999. This book was the first of a thirteen-book series published by Routledge, in which diverse topics such as nihilism, sex, culture, music, etc., have been discussed at a quite sophisticated level. As such, Radical Orthodoxy is well known as a heavy weight theological movement. So much so, that Radical Orthodoxy sympathizer Stephen Long, of Marquette University, half jokingly states, "Radical Orthodoxy's labyrinthine prose tempts some to read it only as an academic parlour game used for inconsequential power struggles in high-brow university religion and philosophy departments."[7] In any case, given the trajectory of Milbank's thought, it is a worthwhile task to re-examine the fundamental claims of the book that began it all.

The Purpose of *Theology and Social Theory*

Theology and Social Theory has two main goals. One is directed towards social theorists and the other to theologians. For the former, Milbank tries to show that there is a "possibility of a skeptical demolition of modern, secular social theory from a perspective with which it is at variance: in this case, that of Christianity."[8] This demolition is possible because in Milbank's reading of the history of the development of social theory[9] "the most important governing assumptions of such

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[7] Stephen Long. "Radical Orthodoxy" in Kevin Vanhoozer (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.) 133

[8] John Milbank. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.) 1

[9] This genealogical approach to understanding and critiquing social theory is certainly influenced by postmodern genealogies of a similar sort. German Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and French Philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) are the prime examples of this.
Cf. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, and J. M. Kennedy. *The Genealogy of Morals; A Polemic*. (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1924.)
Michel Foucault. (*Archaeology of knowledge*. London: Routledge, 2002.)

theory are bound up with the modification or the rejection of Orthodox Christian positions."[10] These fundamental intellectual shifts are, argues Milbank, "no more rationally 'justifiable' than the Christian positions themselves."[11] So secular social theory is an arbitrary heretical reading of society and the world. This is not meant pejoratively, but simply indicates the relation of secular discourse to Christianity. It is a conflict between two differing and equally rationally unfounded worldviews.[12] Any substantial mixing of them is heretical or syncretistic.

To theologians, Milbank seeks to expose the false humility of modern theology, which expresses itself in surrendering "its claim to be a meta-discourse." Once theology refuses to "position, qualify or criticize other discourses, then it is inevitable that these discourses will position theology."[13] Once this positioning takes place, theology typically suffers from one of two fundamental defects:

> Either it idolatrously connects knowledge of God with some immanent field of knowledge – 'ultimate' cosmological causes, or 'ultimate' psychological and subjective needs. Or else it is confined to intimations of a sublimity beyond representation, so functioning to confirm negatively the questionable idea of an autonomous secular realm, completely transparent to rational understanding.[14]

These two alternatives arise from major theological shifts beginning with medieval theologian John Duns Scotus, particularly his doctrine of the univocity of being. To anticipate the analyses in later chapters, beginning with John Duns Scotus a radical shift in theology occurred. God was no longer ontologically transcendent, but existed in the same way as every other being, even if God was the most supreme of

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[10] *Ibid.*
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] Milbank's preferred term for worldview is *mythos (mythoi* plural).
[13] *Ibid.*
[14] *Ibid.*

these beings. If God is merely one being among others, then a doctrine of

participation where all of creation shares in God's being yet is separate from God

does not make sense. The practical implication of this is that if creation shares in the

divine nature, then every possible discourse upon creation must have reference to

God, but if God is just another being 'out there' then each discourse can be relatively

autonomous from God. Two general tendencies in theology resulted from this as

history developed. Either God was domesticated into a Homeric superhuman being

whose role in the world is to be merely its cause and/or fulfillment of psychological

needs (as Milbank alludes to above), or this domestication was seen as idolatry,

which led some to make God transcendent again yet without participation and

analogical language, which makes God unknowable and very easily ignored.[15]

Contrasting this is Radical Orthodoxy's approach:

> The central theological framework of radical orthodoxy is 'participation' as
> developed by Plato and reworked by Christianity, because any alternative
> configuration perforce reserves a territory independent of God. The latter
> can lead only to nihilism (though in different guises). Participation, however,
> refuses any reserve of created territory, while allowing finite things their
> own integrity."[16]

The why and how of this will be worked out in the following chapters, but this

summarizes a large part of Milbank's agenda.

While there are many spheres of knowledge that could position Christian

theology, such as physical science, evolutionary science, other world religions, etc.,

Milbank restricts this work to social theory. His reasoning is that this is natural

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[15] Gavin Hyman. *A Short History of Atheism.* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010.) 68-80
cf. Gavin Hyman. *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?*
(Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.) 35
[16] John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward. *Radical Orthodoxy A New Theology.* (London:
Routledge, 1999.) 3

because theology is now recognizing itself as a "contingent historical construct emerging from, and reacting back upon, particular social practices conjoined with particular semiotic and figural codings."[17] Although Milbank fully concedes this reading of theology, he points out that there is a tendency for theologians then to suppose that Christianity must concede that secular social science is the prime source of knowledge concerning itself. Thus, Milbank sees this work as necessary in correcting this tendency in theology.

Milbank proceeds with an "archaeological approach" which traces "the genesis of the main forms of secular reason in such a fashion as to unearth the *arbitrary moments in the construction of their logic*."[18] Here he is using the methods of postmodern social theorists against themselves (i.e., Foucault). The two main criticisms that Milbank produces through this genealogy are first, that secular social theory only applies to secular society, which it helps to sustain, and second, that secular discourse does not just borrow religious elements, but is "actually constituted in its secularity by 'heresy' in relation to orthodox Christianity, or else a rejection of Christianity that is more 'neo-pagan' than simply anti-religious."[19]

Removing the religious veil from secularity's foundation opens up a clearing for a radically orthodox Christian social theory and comprehensive theological situating of other discourses. For Milbank, once the heterodox Christian elements are purged from secularism, only nihilism remains. Ethically speaking, nihilism is

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[17] *Ibid.*, 2
[18] *Ibid.*, 3 emphasis added
[19] *Ibid.*

the belief that there are no objective moral values.[20] Economically, nihilism is the

belief that commodities have no inherent objective value; hence their value can be

anything at all depending upon supply and demand. Metaphysical nihilism is the

belief that nothing is true, or that nothing exists.[21] Milbank's contention is that these

varieties of nihilism lead to a violent understanding of reality.

For Milbank, nihilism is the ultimate expression of the ontology of violence

which was latent within secular social theory. Christianity can overcome this

violence because it "construes the infinite not as chaos, but as harmonic peace which

is yet beyond the circumscribing power of any totalizing reason."[22] In other words,

while difference is ontologically ultimate for both nihilism and Christianity, only

Christianity provides a social theory of peace because it mirrors an ontology of

peace and harmony within difference that is based upon the ontological Trinity

(Milbank's argument to this effect will be unpacked in chapter three). Thus, Milbank

believes that nihilism's social theory can only be peaceful to the extent that it

conceals its foundations and borrows from Christianity.

It must be made clear from the outset that this exposition and critique of

Milbank focuses on certain issues that the present author sees as fundamental to

Milbank's overall critique. Many arbitrary choices have inevitably gone into the

writing of this thesis, usually choices that involved privileging the ontological and

epistemological foundations of secular social theory rather than in-depth

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[20] Thomas Mautner. *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*. (London: Penguin Books, 2005.) 427. Cf. Friederich Nietzsche wrote, "A nihilist is a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought *not* to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist" Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, Walter Arnold Kaufmann, and R. J. Hollingdale. *The Will to Power*. (NY: Random House, 1967.) *§ 585*
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 5

discussions of the details of these social theories. As such, there are many surface

level details that have been left out due to concerns of space and concision of

argument, but these details are all founded upon the fundamental issues that are

discussed in this thesis and are less important for understanding Milbank's project.

Chapter Contents

Chapter one introduces the basic tenets of philosophical secularism. It is

predicated upon the foundations of liberalism and capitalism. Milbank argues that

liberalism inherits its conceptual categories from late medieval theology, while

capitalism does so from paganism. Capitalism's individualism is also shown to have

its roots in John Duns Scotus' theology. Secularism was constructed through a

unique combination of these elements. By tracing this genealogy, Milbank is trying

to demonstrate that the fundamental categories of secular thinking are religious, but

of a type of religion that is contrary to traditional Christian theology.

Chapter two discusses the major metaphysical shifts in thinking about God

and creation for which Immanuel Kant is known. In short, these are the ideas that

God is epistemologically transcendent in such a way that God cannot be known at all

yet one can know with certainty that God is beyond the bounds of human

knowledge. Kant inherited these ideas from late medieval philosophy, especially

John Duns Scotus, developing them into Kant's critical philosophy. The point of this

chapter is to compare Kant to Thomas Aquinas to see how they offer different and

competing metaphysical systems. The essence of Milbank's argument is that Kant is

as metaphysically dogmatic as any Christian metaphysician. Thus, Kant's

philosophy, which in many ways perfectly expresses the immanentism of

secularism, is shown to be another theology that is merely different from Aquinas' but not more fundamental than it.

Chapter three deals with nihilistic philosophy. Milbank argues that nihilism is the consummate secular philosophy, which is at odds with a Christian philosophy. Themes such as ontological, creational, ontic, and linguistic violence will be discussed. A number of theological topics are raised in reference to these, especially the doctrines of the Trinity, creation, participation and analogical language. The basic conclusion of this chapter is that nihilism, while a complete philosophy of its own, is merely different from Christianity, not somehow more fundamental.

The concluding chapter will cover some loose ends in the analysis of Milbank's thought in *Theology and Social Theory*, and will deal with criticisms of Milbank's overall project. It is only in light of the details of Milbank's central arguments that criticisms can be understood and responded to properly. Final thoughts on Milbank's theological project will be offered, concluding the thesis.

THE THEOLOGICAL GENESIS OF SECULARISM

Introduction

This entire thesis is written with two voices giving different perspectives on the same set of issues. On the one hand, the foundations of secular theory are uncovered and seen to be deeply religious. On the other hand, a Christian philosophy broadly in the style of Thomas Aquinas is argued to provide an alternative to secular theory. This is not to say that it is *prima facie* the only alternative, or even the best alternative, but simply that contemporary Christianity would benefit from rethinking secular thought from a deeply traditional Christian perspective that challenges it. The question could arise whether this thesis focuses on secularism, nihilism, or John Milbank's theology. All three are deeply interrelated and it is only through understanding secularism and nihilism that John Milbank's project in *Theology and Social Theory* will be properly interpreted. To give some shape to this thesis, chapters one and two deal with modern forms of secularism, while chapter three deals with nihilism, which is essentially a postmodern form of secularism. A philosophy/theology inspired by Thomas Aquinas will be compared and contrasted with secularism and nihilism throughout these chapters to see whether it can stand up as a valid alternative capable of bringing the same level of understanding to the foundations of reality. If this can be demonstrated, then a very large part of Milbank's thought will have already been implicitly understood. Only after all of this has been investigated can the larger question be explored of how Milbank's proposal for a Christian social theory fares in the contemporary theological world.

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This chapter will seek to understand John Milbank's understanding and critique of secularism. This will occur through looking at the crucial philosophical and theological considerations that made the invention of secular theory possible. Milbank's basic contention is that secularism can be broken down into parts, which are very specific philosophical premises that can be analyzed and called into question. According to Milbank, secular social theory arose from liberalism, which had its roots in political science and scientific economics.[23] If one carries the analysis further into the past, Milbank thinks, one will find that the seeds of these above mentioned ideas were sown in the late Middle Ages. Because Christian theologians often pursued the philosophy of the Middle Ages, the ideas they developed which lead to secularism were very theological in nature and cannot be understood without reference to the Christian understanding of God. The point of this analysis, as Milbank sees it, is to show that secularism, like all ideas, has a history that can be examined. This examination shows that its key philosophical assumptions were invented. Before discussing how the secular imagination was created, some clarifications regarding definitions are in order.

Secularism Defined

Secularism is most easily defined by examining it from the perspective of the process of secularization. José Casanova of Georgetown University offers three ways of understanding secularization. (1) It is seen as the "decline of religious beliefs and practices in modern societies, often postulated as a universal, human, developmental process" (2), the "privatization of religion, often understood both as

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[23] These will be defined below.

a general modern historical trend and as a normative condition, indeed as a precondition for modern liberal democratic politics," (3) as the "*differentiation of the secular spheres* (state, economy, science), usually understood as 'emancipation' from religious institutions and norms."[24] Milbank certainly agrees with the historical claims in the above three points— religious practice did decline and become more privatized, and the state, economy, and science became separated from religious matters, but the assessment of these claims is disputed.[25] Chapter two will deal with the foundations of (2), how religion became understood as a private rather than public reality. The theoretical foundations that lead to points (1) and (3) will be discussed in this chapter, not in a historiographical sense, but rather the philosophical and theological revolutions in thought that made the invention of the secular possible.

If one is to understand secularism adequately, then one must recognize the importance of the way in which modern secularism uses narratives to justify itself. It does not just tell a story; it tells a self-legitimating story. French Philosopher Jean François Lyotard (1924-1998) has popularized the idea that a great shift has occurred between pre-modern times and modernity in how metanarratives are understood. A metanarrative "sets out the rules of narratives and language games."[26] As such, it is the overall story a culture tells in order to understand itself, and it is the narrative by which an individual seeks to understand him or herself. Summarizing premodern metanarratives, Lyotard wrote, "the knowledge

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[24] José Casanova. "Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective." *Hedgehog Review* 8, no. 1/2 (2006): 7. 7
[25] Casanova disputes them as well, as he is merely defining them in their stereotypical usages.
[26] Simon Malpas. *Jean-François Lyotard.* (London: Routledge, 2003.) 24

transmitted by these narrations… determines in a single stroke what one must say in order to be heard, what one must listen to in order to speak, and what role one must play… to be the object of a narrative"[27] Modern metanarratives by contrast include an element of progress. Simon Malpas of the University of Edinburgh writes that modern metanarratives "point towards a future in which the problems facing a society (which is most often thought of as all of humanity) will be resolved."[28] These modern metanarratives come in two varieties: speculative and emancipatory. The former is associated with the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), who is important in many ways for understanding modern philosophy, but the emancipatory metanarrative is much more important for understanding the genesis of secularism. Malpas writes that the Enlightenment emancipatory metanarrative "focuses on the idea of the freedom of people from religious superstitions that curtail their lives and place power in the hands of the priests."[29] As such, the Enlightenment triumph of reason over religious faith was not seen so much as just an historical occurrence, but it was evaluated as marching in the direction of progress.

The thesis of emancipation has been questioned in the postmodern era. Lyotard wrote, "In contemporary society and culture — postindustrial society, post-modern culture — the question of the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of whether it

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[27] Jean-François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. (*Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). 21
[28] Malpas, *Jean-François Lyotard*, 25
[29] *Ibid.*, 27

is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation."[30] So if emancipation is no

longer the default way of understanding the genesis of secularism, one must dig

deeper into past intellectual traditions to see the contingencies of human thought

that led to its development. Many postmodern theorists have declared the

modernity project to be deeply problematic, but also heavily indebted to medieval

theology and philosophy.[31] Theologians, such as John Milbank in this case, have seen

this as an opportunity use the works of these new theorists in order to question the

validity of secularism and trace its development to certain theological changes in the

Middle Ages. As such, Milbank believes he can challenge secularism by comparing it

with earlier forms of medieval thought, namely that of Thomas Aquinas, to show

that earlier Christian theologies were quite capable of understanding the world in

their own way without the need for secular science. The details of this will be

worked out below, but first, some specific ideas contained in secularism must first

be identified before their heritage can be traced. These ideas are liberalism, political

science, and scientific economics.

Key Ideas of Secularism

Liberalism is a political philosophy that makes freedom/liberty the most

desired end of a social group. So a given society is to organize itself around the idea

that freedom is the highest ideal to be sought. Limits to freedom, or interference,

always need to be justified.[32] The key to understanding liberalism is the way it

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[30] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 37
[31] Éric Alliez's *Capital Times* is just one example of these works. Éric Alliez. *Capital Times.*
(Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.)
[32] Gerald F. Gaus of the University of Arizona writes, "The favored conceptions of liberty will be
liberty as nonintervention in the activity of the self. The essence of the case for the right to natural

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defines freedom. The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor of McGill University describes Liberalism by saying it defines freedom "exclusively in terms of the independence of the individual from interference by others, be these governments, corporations or private persons."[33] It is typically referred to as 'negative' freedom or liberty because there is no positive content to its definition. Freedom is more a faculty or ability than something which has a preferred object. So to be free is to be able to choose among differing options without coercion, but it is indifferent to the content of the options. One can choose good or evil, justice or injustice, etc., but from the perspective of liberalism, the faculty of choice is what matters rather than the content of the choice.[34] Milbank wants to characterize this negative freedom as a euphemism for what he calls 'arbitrary power.' One has the power to choose what one desires to do without coercion. Thus, society is made up of individuals who by nature have this negative freedom or arbitrary power, and its exercise is the *telos* of the society. So the argument that Milbank wants to make is that an honest liberalism must admit that it is a political philosophy that makes arbitrary power the highest end of a society. The pursuit of arbitrary power is argued necessarily to entail violence, for if at least two people differ in their opinions of how to live their lives,

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liberty is that a self-directing moral person will not accept as part of the natural order, and so requiring no justification at all, the authority of another such that the other controls its activity. So it is the intervention of another in the way one directs one's activities that raises the requirement to justify." Gerald F. Gaus. *Value and Justification: The Foundations of Liberal Theory. (*Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1990.) 391

[33] Charles Taylor. "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty." *Filosoficky Casopis* 43, no. 5 (1995): 795-827, 211

[34] Gerald Gaus and Shane D. Courtland. "Liberalism*", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2011 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/liberalism/>

intervention or hindrance of even a very small sort is sure to arise.[35] The details of this are worked out in an exposition of the nature of and genesis of scientific politics and political economy.

Herbert Weisberg of Ohio State University defines **political science** when he writes, "When political science began to be 'scientific,' this generally meant that political scientists were becoming concerned with objective description and generalization. Induction was the dominant mode of theory building, with the goal of explanation being paramount."[36] It used the methods of natural science to form predictive models that could explain and anticipate how people act. This proceeded in a very strict empirical fashion. As A. James Gregor of the University of California writes, "If intuitions, mystic insights, the dialectic, phantasy, or whispered intelligences from God proved to be maximally reliable in permitting men to empirically adapt to and effectively control their environment, they would become, *ipso facto,* constituent procedures of science."[37] He is obviously implying that all these things do not. Thus, it seems justified for Milbank to think that political science is essentially a discipline that studies society as a system of power relations amongst individuals, with no reference to transcendence. By cutting off transcendence, a sphere of social relations in which religion plays no major role is opened. Below it will be shown to have borrowed its anthropology from late

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[35] British historian of ideas Isaiah Berlin wrote that if freedom is to be held up beyond all other ends to an infinite extent, then "it would entail a state in which all men could boundlessly interfere with all other men; and this kind of 'natural' freedom would lead to social chaos." "Two Concepts of Liberty." In: Isaiah Berlin. Henry Hardy, and Ian Harris. *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.) 170

[36] Herbert F. Weisberg. *Political Science: The Science of Politics.* (New York, NY: Agathon Press, 1986.) 3

[37] Anthony James Gregor. *An Introduction to Meta Politics: A Brief Inquiry into the Conceptual Language of Political Science.* (New York [u.a.]: Free Pr, 1971.) 24

medieval scholasticism, particularly its redefinition of God's nature as arbitrary power and the rejection of a doctrine of creation in which creation participates in God's being and nature.[38] A divide is created between God and creation such that the latter is autonomous from the former. Humanity's relation to the world around it is a reflection of God's relation to creation: dominion without virtue.

   Political economy was the original term for referring to the study of the production, distribution, and consumption of goods, and how these were related to law, custom and governance. Milbank has a much narrower locus in mind, for he refers specifically to political economy as capitalism when he traces the development of economics to Machiavelli. For Milbank's intents and purposes, capitalism is a philosophy of economics that studies how humans relate to one another in a competitive way and still results in social outcomes that are benign despite the malign intentions of the individuals within the society.[39] Milbank's fundamental contention with regards to capitalism is that it is a philosophical anthropology. This means that it makes claims about human nature and action that are bound to a particular way of looking at the human condition that differs from traditional Christianity. This is not to say that it is automatically wrong, or that Christianity is automatically better or worse, but it is to say that it gives a different

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[38] Aquinas wrote, "Everything existing in any way comes from God. For whatsoever is present in anything by participation has as its necessary cause that being to which this thing essentially belongs." *ST*. I.44.1, in: Thomas and Mary T. Clark. *An Aquinas Reader*. (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1972.) 64
Cf. *Aquinas, Debated Questions*, II. Q. 2, a. 3 (1), in: ibid., 73
[39] Adam Smith wrote, "by pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good." Adam Smith. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations.* (London: Printed for A. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1793) Ch. 2, 488-489

perspective. With these definitions in place, the more detailed arguments of John

Milbank can now be explored.

Political Theology

Political theology is the domain in which an irreligious or secular sphere

appears, namely as a realm of human activity that makes no reference to

transcendence. This certainly does not exhaust the field of political theology, but it is

within this field that an autonomous sphere of human conduct arises. This may

appear to be a contradiction in terms, for must not theology make reference to

transcendence? The key is to understand that the following writers argued that

although God may exist, the created order could be understood without reference to

God.[40] In other words, the strict dualism between immanence and transcendence is

a very modern idea, because in the earlier more platonic ontologies (such as Plato

and Aquinas) there was an intermixing between transcendence and immanence,

such that immanence could only be understood in reference to the transcendent.[41]

Milbank's key to understanding political theology is to portray its development in

two stages. On the one hand, it is constructed upon Christian heterodoxy from the

late Middle Ages, while on the other hand it is a half-resurgence of paganism

mediated through Machiavelli into the beginnings of liberalism.[42] It is the

intertwining of these two aspects that opens up the space for secular society to

emerge. One must be careful here not to think that Milbank is resorting to name

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[40] This issue technically begins with John Duns Scotus (1266-1308), who will be discussed below.
[41] Charles Taylor. *A Secular Age*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007) 15
[42] John Milbank. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.) 25

calling, for he is not using these terms as an insult but rather to show that from his very biased perspective of traditional Catholic orthodoxy, which he generally associates with Augustinian and Thomistic thought, the modern politics of power borrow elements from both heterodox theology and paganism. When put in these terms, it casts a religious light upon the institution of the secular, the supposedly irreligious.

Political science (or scientific politics) was the first domain in which the secular was constructed, as such by writers such as Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), and Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677).[43] The first move was to assert a sphere of autonomy from theology, which was accomplished by pushing theology into a deistic direction. The "political" was the new autonomous object, which was defined into existence as "a field of pure power."[44] This autonomous object, the political, was deemed to be natural, and it was sealed off from any transcendent *telos*. Milbank writes, "The natural laws governing property and sovereignty could be known *etsi Deus non daretur* [as if God did not exist]."[45] Yet a naturalistic interpretation is not appropriate here, for "the finite totality presupposes that nature is a legally governed domain, obeying completely regular laws of the operation of the power and passion, which yet are willfully laid down by the retired deity."[46] So both physical and moral laws are laid down by the deity, but this deity is interpreted as a 'being' that is essentially separate or absent from the world.

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[43] *Ibid.*, 10
[44] *Ibid.*
[45] *Ibid.*
[46] *Ibid.*

This deistic picture of reality in which realty can be understood without reference to God, even if God does in fact exist, goes a long way towards constructing a sphere of human activity that is unaffected by religion. Milbank points out that this sphere is artificial, for it was a novel invention that was not obvious. Milbank writes, "the new political knowledge could rest on the material foundations of *conatus* [self-preserving impulse], but from then on, the knowledge of power was simply a retracing of the paths of human construction, an analysis of *factum* (the made)."[47] First, the self-preserving impulse was seen as a way of understanding human activity without reference to transcendence, for survival is an immanent concern. Secondly, if one wants to understand how this autonomous sphere works, one just needs to look at the rules that we as humans have invented for ourselves, and then how our behavior in fact matches up with these rules.

Regarding the first issue of the self-preserving impulse serving as the essence of humanity, two questions inevitably need to be asked: what was the original state of humankind before the institution of society, and secondly, why and how then did humans engage in society making, for at first glance it would seem that a egoistic society is a bit of a contradiction in terms since there would be no social cohesion present.

Answering the first question, Thomas Hobbes wrote, "during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war as is of every man against every man"[48] This is

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[47] *Ibid*., 11
[48] Thomas Hobbes and A. D. Lindsay. *Leviathan*. (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1914.) Chapter XIII, §8

commonly referred to as the right of nature (*jus naturale*).[49] So before human

society is created, war is fundamental. Milbank notes that it is important to see the

biblical notion of a primitive "paradisal community to be, as it were, 'ontologically

impossible'."[50] Answering the second question, out of this state of nature emerges

society where each member gives up certain freedoms in order to gain certain

instrumental advantages such as "personal security and non-interference in 'private'

pursuits (selling, contracts, education, choice of abode)."[51] These advantages are

ensured by the political state which "is only conceivable as an 'Artificial Man'

(Leviathan) whose identity and reality are secured by an unrestricted right to

preserve and control his own artificial body."[52] There is a paradox here, for an

absolute sovereign who cannot be bound (is above the law) enforces the freedoms

of liberal society. Thus, a "liberal peace requires a single undisputed power, but not

necessarily a majority consensus," which highlights the fact that there is a "kinship

at root of modern absolutism with modern liberalism."[53] This relationship between

the political state and the egoistic members of society is an expression of an

"ontology of violence," or "a reading of the world which assumes the priority of force

and tells how this force is best managed and confined by counter-force."[54] This is the

key to Milbank's deconstruction of liberalism: violence is the most fundamental

social reality, and any sort of peace that emerges from this violence only conceals

the ultimate nature of things. Even this peace is ultimately coercive; violence is

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[49] *Ibid.* Chapter XIV. §1
[50] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 17
[51] *Ibid.*
[52] *Ibid.* cf. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Introduction §1
[53] *Ibid.*
[54] *Ibid.*, 4

countered by a bigger and larger violence that keeps the smaller violences in check. It is similar to a criminal organization that because of its power keeps the local street gangs in check. This is in contradistinction to a Christian peace, which aims at reconciliation rather than a simply absence of outward conflict caused by domination.

Returning to the human construction of this autonomous political sphere, Milbank observes, "the knowledge of power was simply a retracing of the paths of human construction, an analysis of *factum* (the made)."[55] The idea is that the social arrangement of society is essentially created by humans, meaning that we determine the rules of how people interact and are also the agents who then act in these ways. So once it was admitted that social relations are essentially under the control of people, the path to the following argument was made: "The sphere of the artificial, of *factum*, marks out the space of secularity."[56]

Milbank calls into question the connection between the autonomous and man-made nature of human society. Rather than seeing this connection as natural, Milbank argues that it is purely contingent. This is because one can easily imagine a scenario in which humans construct their own society, but do so on the basis of a belief that transcendence was a major part of human life, and that this connection to transcendence implies the objectivity of goodness which can be embodied in differing degrees in this humanly constructed society.[57] What makes the secular account purely contingent is using the self-preserving impulse as the key to

[55] *Ibid.*,11
[56] *Ibid.*
[57] *Ibid.*

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understanding society. In this picture of society, people primarily interact with their surroundings in a purely instrumental way. This simply asserts a single approach to anthropology and suppresses other ways of construing society. Notably absent is the Aristotelian understanding of praxis "where one seeks not to control with precision, but with a necessary approximation to persuade, exhort and encourage a growth in the virtues as ends in themselves."[58] Also lacking is the distinctly Christian understanding of the self-preserving impulse at the expense of others' well-being to be simply a distortion of Christian virtue or a redefinition of it. In any case, the secular as a sphere of pure power arbitrarily makes the impulse to self-preservation the only *telos* within human interaction. It shuts out transcendence and forces human conduct into the mold of following immanent ends.

Political Science and Late Medieval Theology

Continuing with the theme that secular politics was originally constituted by theology, Milbank goes on to say that, "for the factum (the made) to become identified with the secular, it was necessary that Adam's *dominium* [dominion] be redefined as power, property, active right, and absolute sovereignty, and that Adam's personhood be collapsed into this redefined mastery that is uniquely 'his own'."[59] In other words, according to the Genesis account of creation, humankind's *dominion* of nature is defined as the right and power to use it for whatever means one desires, and the essential feature of humanity is its self–possession, its right to exercise its will however it wills. The interest of this to the overall thesis is that this

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[58] *Ibid.*, 12
cf. Aristotle wrote, legislators must… urge people towards virtue and exhort them to aim at the fine."
Aristotle, and Terence Irwin. *Nicomachean Ethics*. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub. Co, 1985.) 1180a
[59] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 13

is precisely how liberal negative freedom was first imagined. It was first imagined by Christian voluntarism, which is often associated with William of Ockham, who will be discussed below.

Dominion as self-government traditionally meant a mastery over one's passions, which was then in turn the basis for control and possession of objects. The change that occurred to this classical and medieval meaning was a recovery of a "more brutal and original *dominium [dominion],* the unrestricted lordship over what lies within one's power – oneself, one's children, land or slaves – in Roman private law."[60] While this definition of Dominion was present at the margins in classical and medieval thought, it came to the center in the late Middle Ages and again in the 17th century. For Roman thought, this brutal dominion was not truly political because it only held within the household which was not fully integrated into public law. The later developers of Roman law shifted dominion from the household into the *polis*, turning political justice itself into a matter of dominion. Milbank notes that Jean Gerson (1363-1429) who in particular made this move, traces *dominium* to the "*facultas* which possesses the power to do as it likes with its own, such that a property right is as much 'the right to exchange' as the 'right to make use of.'"[61] This shifts natural law away from what is 'right,' 'just' or 'good' to a simple active right over property.

Milbank contrasts this view of dominion with Thomas Aquinas' (1225-1274) attempt to tame Roman dominion with his concept of a right of use but not ownership (*dominium utile).* A quick exposition of Thomas' views will be profitable

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[60] *Ibid.*
[61] *Ibid.*

to see the great contrast between this and the previously mentioned Roman private law. Regarding owning property, Thomas makes a crucial distinction between possessing something in its nature or in its use. Only God possesses things in their natures, but "as regards their use, and in this way, man has a natural dominion over external things, because, by his reason and will, he is able to use them for his own profit, as they were made on his account."[62] Continuing, he wrote,

> The possession of external things is natural to man. Moreover, this natural dominion of man over other creatures, which is competent to man in respect of his reason wherein God's image resides, is shown forth in man's creation (Genesis 1:26) by the words: "Let us make man to our image and likeness: and let him have dominion over the fishes of the sea," etc.[63]

So it is natural for humans to possess property. But Aquinas continued with the question of whether it is lawful, not merely natural, for man to possess property. He stated,

> Two things are competent to man in respect of exterior things. One is the power to procure and dispense them, and in this regard it is lawful for man to possess property…the second thing that is competent to man with regard to external things is their use. On this respect **man ought to possess external things, not as his own, but as common, so that, to wit, he is ready to communicate them to others in their need**.[64]

This is clearly very different from the brutal *dominium* of Roman private law. There is an implicit appeal to a *telos* beyond egocentricism, for the individual, while still legally owning his property is permitted to use it only for ends that benefit the surrounding people. So Aquinas' definition of private property includes a socialist

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[62] Saint Thomas Aquinas. *The Summa Theologica.* Second and Revised Edition, 1920 Literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Online Edition Copyright © 2008 by Kevin Knight. *ST* II.II.Q.66.a1.
[63] *Ibid.*
[64] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica,* II.II.Q.66.a2 (emphasis added)

twist that keeps private property yet transforms the private Roman law version of it.

The question inevitably arises, how exactly did this reimagined notion of 'pure power' as the object of politics gain a favorable hearing? Milbank's answer is that it took its cue from late medieval theology, which has a tendency to emphasize God's power over his other attributes.[65] From this, the new politics could assert, "men, when enjoying unrestricted, unimpeded property rights and even more when exercising the rights of a sovereignty that 'cannot bind itself', come closest to the *imago dei.*"[66]

Milbank's arguments concerning late medieval theology are extremely brief, so other sources have been consulted to give the background understanding that then makes sense of his brief statements.[67] One way of understanding the issue is to construe it in terms of the relation between God's nature and intellect, which will be explored below. Humans as liberal, or radically free, mirror the nominalist God who is a pure will. God acts in arbitrary ways because to say that he has a nature and is bound to it is to say that God is not truly free. So if God is truly free, he must not be simply acting in accordance with his nature–goodness, justice, etc, for this would imply that God is in fact not free. It is essential at this point to see the connection with liberal negative freedom. God is said to possess freedom, but freedom becomes redefined negatively to mean that God has the ability to do whatever he pleases

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[65] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 15
[66] *Ibid.* 16
[67] Milbank admits in CBC Radio's *Ideas with Paul Kennedy: The Myth of the Secular, Part 6,* that this shift in late medieval thought is one of the most important aspects of his critique of secular thought, which makes one wonder why he does not spell it out more clearly in *Theology and Social Theory*.

without outside interference. In contrast to this is Aquinas' view of God's freedom, which is closer to what Canadian Philosopher Charles Taylor would call positive freedom which has more to do with "individual self-realization" and is defined as "the ability to fulfill my purposes... [which are] greater the more significant the purposes."[68] The idea is that God has a moral character and a purpose that is beyond a mere ability to do whatever he wants, and that his will is subordinate to his character and his purposes.[69] This is related to Aquinas' doctrine concerning the relation of the will to the intellect, which will now be considered.

Aquinas' view is that the will is subordinate to the intellect, meaning that the will always chooses in accordance with what the intellect perceives to be good. Because of the subordination of the will to the intellect, scholars sometimes call this theory intellectualism.[70] Humans often will actions that are not in accordance with the Good (as God sees it) because they have not seen God in his essence, meaning that they do not in fact have a clear knowledge of what is good (for God is goodness itself). The will then chooses in accordance with what the intellect perceives as good, which may in fact not be the good, for the intellect can be mistaken about this. This is how people choose wrong actions. Their intellect mistakes something that is not good for something that is good.[71] Of course, God cannot have this problem for God knows goodness, which is nothing other than his own character. Thus, God's

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[68] Charles Taylor. "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty*." Filosoficky Casopis* 43, no. 5 (1995): 795-827, 229.

[69] Cf. Aquinas wrote, "in respect to that principal object, God's goodness, the divine will is under necessity, not of force but of natural inclination, which... is not irreconcilable with freedom." *On Truth*, q. 23, a. 4, c. In: Thomas, *et* al, An *Aquinas Reader*, 155

[70] *"*Medieval Theories of Free Will," by Colleen McClusky, *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ISSN 2161-0002, http://www.iep.utm.edu/freewi-m/, accessed Feb. 11th 2013

[71] Copleston, Frederick C. *A History of Philosophy*. (London: Burns, Oates, & Washbourne, 1951.) Vol. 2. *Medieval Philosophy*. 380-381

will chooses in accordance with his intellect, which knows goodness (himself).

Therefore, God acts according to his nature, which is goodness itself. As Aquinas

wrote, "the divine will has a necessary relation to the divine goodness, since that is

its proper object. Hence God wills His own goodness necessarily, even as we will our

own happiness necessarily."[72]

Contrasting this is a voluntarist picture of God. Voluntarism is "the theory

that God or the ultimate nature of reality is to be conceived as some form of will (or

conation)."[73] A theory of this sort would assert that the will is prior to the intellect

so that the will does not necessarily choose what the intellect knows is good. In

other words, God can choose what is contrary to his character. Or as it is sometimes

put, God does not really have a nature other than a sort of absolutely powerful will.

The consequence of this is that God could do acts such as directly cause a human

being to hate God without injustice, which seems quite strange from the perspective

of the Thomist view.[74]

English Franciscan theologian William of Ockham (1288-1348) is Milbank's

preferred spokesman for this voluntarist view. For Ockham, the Good is defined in

terms of the divine will, rather than the divine nature. So a good action is not

intrinsically good (reflective or participating in the divine Good), rather a good thing

or action is merely named as good by God.[75] Thus, goodness as a quality is nothing

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[72] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, .I.Q19.A3

[73] "Voluntarism," by Anonymous, *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ISSN 2161-0002, http://www.iep.utm.edu/voluntar, accessed Feb. 11th 2013.

[74] Frederick C. Copleston. *A History of Philosophy*. London: Burns, Oates, & Washbourne, 1951. Vol. 3. *Late Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy*. 95.

[75] *Ibid.*, 104
Cf. When Ockham questions whether an act can be necessarily virtuous, he does not answer affirmatively because it conforms with God's character, rather he links it with God's commandments.

more than a name that God applies to certain things and not to others; it is merely nominal. Here one sees potential for the charge of arbitrariness. God is not bound to anything other than his will, which is not really defined by anything else. God can do whatever he pleases so long as he does not violate the law of contradiction.[76] In other words, God maximally possesses liberal negative freedom.

Linking this discussion of voluntarism back up to dominion, Milbank thinks it is helpful to emphasize the distinction between grace freely given and sanctifying grace. Dominion is a grant of grace, but only in the sense of being freely given and not in the sense of a grace that deepens one's righteousness.[77] This again highlights the rift between ownership and righteousness that was created. To own is to have complete and utter freedom to do whatever one wants with one's property. Milbank notes that this comes to an apex in Thomas Hobbes: "The right of Nature, whereby God reigneth over men, and punisheth those that break his Lawes, is to be derived, not from his creating them, as if he required obedience as of gratitude for his benefits; but from his *Irresistible Power*."[78] With the fundamental being (God) now conceived of primarily as power, it is not surprising that humans created in God's image could be argued to reflect this dominance of power, as liberalism later did.

God's word, not his character seems to be the source of virtue. William of Ockham, Philotheus Boehner, and Stephen F. Brown. *Philosophical writings: a selection*. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub. Co, 1990.) 161

[76] *Ibid.*, 109 Cf. Ockham gives a very strange answer (from a Thomistic perspective) to the question of whether sin is from God. He wrote, "Everything that is a sin is from God. But God does not sin, since He is not obliged to do the opposite of that which is a sin, because He is debtor to no one." *Quodlibeta,* III, Q. iii. In: Ockham, *et al, Philosophical Writings: A Selection*, 146
God is always without sin because there is no one to accuse him, not necessarily because he is perfect goodness.

[77] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 16

[78] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part II, Ch. 31, p. 397

Thus, negative liberty was an essentially theological invention.[79] This of course does not imply that one must be a theist to believe in negative liberty. But it would suggest that a theologian who wanted to challenge liberalism would need to argue for a doctrine of God much closer to that of Aquinas rather than that of Ockham.

John Duns Scotus and Modernity

This change in God's relation to goodness mentioned above is actually based upon a deeper ontological shift within the doctrine of creation. This ontological shift occurs within the thought of John Duns Scotus, whose theology/philosophy begins many intellectual moves that make modernity possible. In many ways, this connection is one of the major faults of *Theology and Social Theory*, for it tends to gloss over this all too briefly, which may leave the reader unconvinced of its importance. To counterbalance this and show that Milbank's account does in fact make sense, the writings of some others will be used as a supplement.

The general point that Milbank makes is that the Platonic ontology of participation as utilized by Thomas Aquinas in which creation is in some way distinct from yet participates in God, just as Plato's forms participate in the world yet are separate from it,[80] is rejected. Rather than creation participating in the goodness of God so that there is actual objective goodness in the world, a moral law encoded into the very being of creation, there is just a world without an intrinsic

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[79] Technically, negative liberty was not first imagined by Christian theology. Plato mentions it in *The Republic* in connection with the ring of Gyges, but it first became 'acceptable' when Christian theology began to imagine a God who possessed negative liberty.
[80] *On Seperated Substances*. C, 3. In: Thomas, *et* al, An *Aquinas Reader*, 71

law, and any law this world knows is imposed extrinsically.[81] Theologically

speaking, what is good is simply what God says is good, rather than the good things

of the world participating in God's goodness. As Milbank puts it, "No longer is the

world participatorily enfolded within the divine expressive *logos*, but instead a bare

divine unity starkly confronts the other distinct unities which he has ordained."[82]

This creates an open space for arbitrary human law and power, for God is defined by

his arbitrary power and his imposition of arbitrary law. With the relation between

God and his creation now understood as merely nominal rather than metaphysical

(participatory), as being fundamentally non-essential, the relation is now a sort of

contractual or legal bond. God is now seen as an absolute monarch who interacts

directly with his creation rather than through secondary means as a more

Trinitarian understanding of God would have it. Or as Robert Schreiter of the

Catholic Theological Union notes, "essentially what it did is remove any

intermediary or secondary causality between God and individuals humans — or the

absolute monarch and individual subjects."[83]

Likewise humans do not have a nature that prescribes how they should act.

Their freedom is not seen as the ability to act in accordance with their nature but as

the ability to do whatever they want—arbitrary power. Milbank sees this as the

inauguration of "a new anthropology which begins with human persons as

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[81] While only stated briefly in *Theology and Social Theory,* this theme is expanded upon a bit in 'John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward. *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*. (London: Routledge, 1999)*, 3, and greatly expanded upon so as to become one of the main themes of Conor Cunningham's *Genealogy of Nihilism*: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology. (London: Routledge, 2002.)

[82] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 15

[83] Robert J Schreiter. "From Postmodernity to Countermodernity: John Milbank's Undertaking." *Continuum* (St. Xavier College (Chicago, IL) 3, (January 1, 1994): 286-303. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed January 9, 2013).287-8

individuals and yet defines their individuality essentialistically, as 'will' or 'capacity' or 'impulse to self-preservation'."[84] So just as God does not necessarily act in accordance with his nature (if God has one, that is), humans also have no true nature other than to mirror this arbitrary power of God. Rather than the essence of humanity being pursuit of the Good, the Just, and the Beautiful as expressions of positive freedom, the essence of humanity is reduced to arbitrary power. This is the crucial intellectual move that made it possible to conceive of the autonomous sphere of power required by modern secularism.

But this is an over-simplification. What needs to be added to this account is Duns Scotus creation of both logical and political atomism. The shift away from ontological participation to the univocity of being and an individualist reading of society are complicit with logical atomism, which briefly defined states that a being "must be thinkable in abstraction from all that has caused it, and from its constitutive co-belonging with other realities."[85] The individualism of liberalism is basically a late manifestation of Duns Scotus' logical atoms.

The project of showing how Duns Scotus was the precursor to modernity is not without its critics. Theologian and philosopher Thomas Williams of the University of South Florida writes that, "it is a noteworthy feature of the Radical Orthodoxy literature that quite breathtaking inferences are made from the doctrine of univocity [explained below] with little or no argumentative support."[86] One must

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[84] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 15

[85] Catherine Pickstock. 2005. *"Duns Scotus: His Historical and Contemporary Significance." Modern Theology* 21, no. 4: 543-574. 553

[86] Thomas Williams. "The Doctrine of Univocity is True and Salutary*." Modern Theology* 21, no. 4 (October 1, 2005): 575-585. 582

agree with Williams that the textual records of many assertions concerning Scotus'

doctrines leave something to be desired. Even in the writings of some of Radical

Orthodoxy's critics one finds a similar lack.[87] This makes it very difficult to verify

whether their interpretations of Scotus are correct, or even why they make them in

the first place. Although Williams also contends that Radical Orthodoxy

fundamentally misunderstands Duns Scotus on the question of univocity, he does

admit that some of their interpretations of the consequences of univocity may in fact

make sense as long as one misunderstands Duns Scotus.[88] In other words, they may

correctly chronicle ideas that lead to modernity, but they erroneously attribute

them to Duns Scotus. As Richard Cross notes, this is because Milbank and Radical

Orthodoxy understand Duns Scotus to be elaborating an ontology, when he is in fact

only discussing semantics.[89] One should note that Milbank's and Pickstock's reading

of Duns Scotus are certainly not original to them. For example, French Philosophers

Gilles Deleuze[90] and Éric Alliez[91] both interpret Duns Scotus as being involved in

inaugurating a new ontology, rather than merely discussing semantics. As will be

noted below the exposition of Duns Scotus that follows, perhaps the question is not

whether Duns Scotus intentionally created a new ontology, but whether his doctrine

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[87] I am here thinking of Gavin Hyman's works.
Gavin Hyman. *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?*
(Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); *A Short History of Atheism*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010.)
[88] Williams, "The Doctrine of Univocity is True and Salutary," 581-582
[89] Richard Cross. "'Where Angels Fear to Tread': Duns Scotus and Radical Orthodoxy*." Antonianum*
76, no. 1 (January 1, 2001): 7-41.
[90] "There has only ever been one ontological proposition: Being is univocal. There has only ever been
one ontology, that of Duns Scotus, which gave being a single voice." Gilles Deleuze. *Difference and
Repetition.* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993) 35
[91] "The great Scotist ontological proposition expresses the definitive *metaphysical* exit out of the
sphere of the ontotheological One, within which the theory of analogy evolves (that theory is only
valid through/in a metaphysics of participation that reduces ontology to a theology: every existent in
its finite measure partakes in the divine nature)." Éric Alliez, *Capital Times*, 199

of the univocity of being logically implied a new ontology. But before attempting to adjudicate this, Duns Scotus' actual position on God and language must be explored.

To put matters all too briefly, John Duns Scotus inaugerated a new trend in philosophy when he began to analyze the way we used the word 'being' or 'existence' in reference to God and creatures. The Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) summarizes Aquinas' earlier understanding of this when he says that "being (esse), with which he is concerned and to which he attributes the modalities of the One, the True, the Good and the Beautiful, is the unlimited abundance of reality which is beyond all comprehension, as it, in its emergence from God, attains subsistence and self-possession within the finite entities."[92]The basic point is that God and creation do not share "being" in common, rather only God truly exists and creation derivatively proceeds as a contingent donation of God's being. Thus, being means radically different things when predicated of God and creatures. Aquinas was careful to note that being was not equivocal, meaning completely different things, and suggested that there was an analogy of being between creator and creature.[93] Duns Scotus was dissatisfied with

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[92] Quoted in: Gavin Hyman. *A Short History of Atheism.* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010.) 68
This quote is important because it summarizes so many aspects of Aquinas' philosophy in a very beautiful, illuminating, and compact way. The ideas contained within can be located in diverse places as noted below.
Cf. Aquinas wrote, "God is not a measure that is proportionate to what is measured; so it does not follow that he and his creatures belong to the same order." Aquinas, *Summa Theologica,* 1.13.5
Aquinas links Being and Truth in *De Veritate* Q.1 A.1 and in *Summa Theologica* 1.16.5-6 Being and the Good in *Summa Theologica* II.94.; I.6.4; *Debated Questions* II. q. 2, a. 3 (1). Goodness and Beauty are linked in *Summa Theologica* 1.5.4
God is the exemplar of reality: *Summa Theologica.* 1.44.3
God is beyond comprehension: *Summa Theologica.* 1.12.1
God is the source of being because his essence is his existence, and finite things only exist by participating in his existence. *Summa Theologica.* 1.3.4
[93] "God likewise gives all perfections to things and he, therefore, is both like and unlike them." *Summa Theologica,* 1.29, in: Thomas, *et al*, *An Aquinas Reader,* 135

this, and summarized his own views in a nutshell when he wrote, "being is univocal to the created and uncreated."[94] He also said, "and so it is clear that 'being' has a primacy of commonness in regard to the primary intelligibles, that is, to the quidditative concepts of the genera, species, individuals, and all their essential parts, *and to the Uncreated Being.*"[95]This is called the univocity of being, meaning that 'being' applies to both God and creation in the same way. Catherine Pickstock of Cambridge University comments that "the position of the analogical, as a third medium between identity and difference, whereby something can be like something else in its very unlikeness according to an ineffable co-belonging, is rejected by Duns Scotus because it does not seem to be rationally thinkable."[96]

Thomas Williams disagrees with Pickstock's interpretation of Duns Scotus on this point. He does think that it is incoherent, thus agreeing that Duns Scotus would think it is incoherent. But he thinks that Duns Scotus is in fact rejecting something other than the analogical in the text that Pickstock cites as the source for her statement. Duns Scotus is actually discussing different ways of picture how analogical language functions. Focusing on the second type of analogical predication, a term can apply to one thing in a prior way and apply to another thing in a posterior way. Thus, as Duns Scotus wrote, "signifying follows understanding. So if χ is understood in a prior way to y, then if χ is signified by the same term as is y, it is

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[94] John Duns Scotus. *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Allan Wolter (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1962) 5
Cf. "Whatever pertains to 'being', then, insofar as it remains indifferent to finite and infinite, or as proper to the Infinite Being, does not belong to it as determined to a genus, but prior to any such determination, and therefore as transcendental and outside any genus." *Ibid.*, 2
[95] *Ibid.*, 4, emphasis added
[96] Pickstock, "Duns Scotus: His Historical and Contemporary Significance*,*" 547

signified by that term in a prior way."[97] He went on to suggest that this mode of

analogy is problematic because language cannot formally accommodate different

orders of ontology.[98]This is not saying he rejected that terms can be signified

primarily of God and secondarily of creatures, only that our language does not have

a formal mechanism to register this difference accurately. As he concludes,

"Therefore, an ordering in things does not imply an ordering in the signification of

words."[99] Thus, the univocity of being as Duns Scotus intended it, is a semantic

theory and not ontology.

One can ask the very simple question, that if knowledge is discursive, then

can our language indeed apply to God? For it seems the Duns Scotus tries to clarify

our language of analogy in order to show that ontological analogy indeed is only

known through univocal language. As Duns Scotus put it, "Notwithstanding the

irreducible ontological diversity between God and creatures, there are concepts

under whose extension both God and creatures fall, so that the corresponding

predicate expressions are used with exactly the same sense in predications about

God as in predications about creatures."[100] The crucial question, then, seems to be

whether this actually solves or simplifies anything. If God is ontologically different

than creation and our language applies to God as if it were applying to creation, then

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[97] In Praed. 4, nn. 28. Quoted in Williams, "The Doctrine of Univocity is True and Salutary," 581-582
[98] Duns Scotus wrote, "The second mode of analogy described above seems impossible. For it can happen that what is unqualifiedly prior is unknown when the name is imposed on what is posterior, given that what is unqualifiedly posterior can be prior with respect to us, and thus be understood and signified in a prior way. Therefore, if the term in question is imposed second on what is unqualifiedly prior, it is obvious that it will not signify in a posterior way that on which it was first imposed; given that it once signified the latter primarily, it will always signify the latter primarily. For after a term is imposed, it is not changed with respect to signifying that on which it is imposed." *Ibid.*, nn32
[99] *Ibid.*, nn32
[100] *Ord.* 1, d 3, pars 1, q 3, n163. Quoted in Williams, "The Doctrine of Univocity is True and Salutary," 584

is God not distorted by our use of language? It seems that even if the univocity of being is a semantic thesis, then our knowledge of God must be either equivocal or univocal. The flatness of univocal language rules out a conceptual understanding of ontological analogy. Thus, either one signifies God univocally yet must always implicitly understand that words fall short of God, or we signify God univocally and believe that our language does correspond to God adequately. Therefore, one either agrees with Aquinas' apophatic[101] approach to language or one does indeed domesticate God.

As for whether the analogy of being is comprehensible or not, perhaps the question is misguided. Dionysius summarized the analogy of being when he wrote, "The same things are like and unlike to God; like, according as they imitate him, as far as they can, who is not perfectly imitable; unlike, according as effects are not as great as their causes."[102] One wonders whether denying this because it is difficult or perhaps impossible to conceive is a valid theological procedure or if it simply projects a finite limitation upon God. Perhaps Duns Scotus and Williams are both confusing ontology with semantics, for they argue that if we cannot explain how something works, i.e. we cannot think our way through it, then it simply cannot be the case in a ontological sense. But this limits God's being and his relation to creation to something that finite humans can think, which is to domesticate God. Insisting on the univocity of being and insisting that it provides univocal knowledge

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[101] Apophatic theology, also called negative theology, is "a theology which emphasizes the limitations of the human intellect and the impossibility of saying anything of God except what he is not. Thomas Mautner. The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy. (London: Penguin Books , 2005.) 35
[102] Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, IX. Quoted in *Summa Theologica*, 1.29, in: Thomas, *et al*, *An Aquinas Reader,* 136

of God seems to flatten ontology unwittingly in the sense that anything that 'is,' exists in precisely the same way, domesticating God and elevating the creature.

While accounting for Duns Scotus' discussion on the univocity of being is a fairly simple matter, the implications of this theory are widely debated. As such, much of the contemporary debate is not focused on what Duns Scotus said, but rather on the implications of his work. Duns Scotus clearly thought his univocity of being made predication of God possible without reducing God's transcendence, but as was shown above his attempt furthered nothing. As such, moving on to discuss the opinions of some contemporary commentators will further clarify how Duns Scotus is interpreted as the Father of Modernity. These interpretations do in fact go beyond the corpus of Duns Scotus in important ways because if he were mistaken about the compatibility of the univocity of being with God's transcendence, then his writings would not accurately chronicle the shift in ontology that he actually created.

Pickstock argues that one result of Duns Scotus' univocity of being is that creation as 'gift' or 'donation' of God's own being that is mysteriously different from God becomes eclipsed by an either/or logic where something is either God or not God. For Duns Scotus, God and creatures both exist in exactly the same way, resulting in a situation where creation and God are completely separate entities. But what follows from relegating creation to something that is not truly a gift of God's being is that being can now be studied without reference to God.[103] Metaphysics becomes the study of being without reference to God, other than as a bare causal

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[103] Duns Scotus wrote, "'being' is the first object of the intellect." Duns Scotus, *et* al, Duns Scotus: *Philosophical Writings*, 4

agent that may have caused the temporal beginning of the created order. This leads

to a situation in which creation can be understood in an immanent manner without

reference to transcendence. Or as Catherine Pickstock explains,

> If each finite position does not occupy the problematic (even, one can admit)
> contradictory space of participation, then it is identical with its own space,
> and univocity involves necessarily a logic of self-possession which may be at
> variance with the theological notion that being in its very existence is donum
> and not the mere ground for the reception of a gift—even for the gift of
> determination of this ens as finite… Being can be treated purely
> "metaphysically" (for the first time) in abstraction from "physical" issues of
> cause and moving interactions.[104]

This creates the logical notion of self-identity, where an object is self-identical. This

essentially means that an object is that object and not some other object. This can

also be construed in terms of self-possession: if an object is self-identical it does not

owe its being to another and thus is in compete possession of its own being. While

this sounds very intuitive to modern ears, things are not self-identical for Aquinas,

for given creation *ex nihilo* and creation as gift of God's being, an object is divided

between God's *esse* and nothingness.[105]

Pickstock argues this shows that Duns Scotus redefined the very categories

in which one thought about finite reality. Objects were now self-identical, self-

possessed things that could be understood in complete isolation from their

surroundings. This is very obviously the invention of logical atomism, but it should

be clear by now that this lays the groundwork for individualism. Individualism of a

strict sort really had no place within Aquinas' thought because things can only be

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[104] Pickstock, "Duns Scotus: His Historical and Contemporary Significance," 553
[105] Aquinas, Summa Theologica, II.52

understood in their broader context, all of which participated in the divine *esse*.[106]

Reference both to God and the surrounding context was required for understanding

any particular thing, but Duns Scotus switched this around and made everything

understandable in isolation. This notion of self-identity in logic certainly could lead

to political atomism in which a group of people is considered as a collection of

individuals selfs. But as Lyotard points out, "A *self* does not amount to much, but no

self is an island ... [E]ven before he is born, if only by virtue of the name he is given,

the human child is already positioned as the referent of a story recounted by those

around him, in relation to which he will inevitably chart his course."[107] This does not

necessarily refute political atomism, for logical atomism could be true, but it does

point out that a more holistic approach to both logic and politics makes at least as

much sense a atomistic approaches.

Bringing Milbank back into this discussion, he writes, "It has to be stressed

that there is nothing peculiar to Radical Orthodoxy whatsoever about this Scotus-

centred genealogy, despite the disingenuous insinuations of Richard Cross and his

ilk. To the contrary, the idea that Scotus is the real turning point in the history of

Western theology and philosophy is now the received wisdom of historians of

ideas."[108] The point is that Duns Scotus played a role in shaping modernity whether

he meant to or not. This may be because many misunderstood Duns Scotus, which

would make many later developments purely contingent, or because Duns Scotus

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[106] Addmittedly, Radical Orthodoxy's interpretation of Aquinas on this point is very indebted to linguistic idealism and Jacques Derrida's thought.

[107] Lyotard*, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* 15

[108] John Milbank. *The Grandeur of Reason and Perversity of Rationalism: Radical Orthodoxy's First Decade*, in *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader.* Ed. Simon Oliver and John Milbank (London: Routledge, 2009.) 379

had inconsistencies in his own thought that lead to modernity. Either way, this does not change his importance.

Linking this with the overall goal of this chapter, which is to locate the crucial philosophical moves that lead to modern secularism and provide Thomistic counterexamples, Duns Scotus helped provide a foundation for secular social theory for a few reasons. If God is univocal to creation, then the latter cannot participate in the former. In this case, creation can technically be understood without reference to God for it has its own being (self-identity). This is the beginning of the idea of an autonomous sphere of reality. This self-identity is also linked with logical atomism, which is a precursor to political atomism in which society is seen as a group of individuals who can understand themselves without relation to others. The true importance of tracing these ideas back to the Middle Ages is not merely to find their earliest proponents, but it is to show the reader that one's theology is deeply involved in how one responds to modernity. Milbank suggests that if one is to avoid the pitfalls of modernity, namely how it leads to nihilism, then one must go back to a theology that was not involved in the development of secular modernity. This of course is not a blind return to a golden age of theology, but a recovery of certain foundational theological principles that may serve contemporary theologians in constructively engaging secularism today.

Scientific Politics and Machiavellianism

John Milbank notes that the political philosophy of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) "is another and completely different root of the secular." This is the link between the arbitrary power of negative liberty and the violence that Milbank

thinks necessarily follows. The Machiavellian Moment can be construed as "the astonishing re-emergence of pagan political and philosophical time no longer [understood] as a makeshift, nor a Thomist preparation for grace, but rather something with its own integrity, its own goals and values, which might even contradict those of Christianity."[109] In other words, it is the emergence of an alternate *mythos* or worldview to Christianity that gives a radically different conception of the *telos* of history. This is essentially in line with the thought of Machiavelli.

For example, Machiavelli wrote, "it is necessary to whoever arranges to found a Republic and establish laws in it, to presuppose that all men are bad and that they will use their malignity of mind every time they have the opportunity."[110] When discussing how a leader should relate to his or her people, Machiavelli stated, "It is far safer to be feared than loved."[111] When discussing governance he observed that, "In judging policies we should consider the results that have been achieved through them rather than the means by which they have been executed."[112] Thus, the ends justify the means, meaning that there is essentially no moral good which binds one's behavior, especially a ruler. Indeed, "a prince ought to have no other aim or thought, nor select anything else for his study, than war and its rules and discipline; for this is the sole art that belongs to him who rules, and it is of such force that it not only upholds those who are born princes, but it often enables men to rise

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[109] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 23
[110] Niccolò Machiavelli and Bernard Crick. *The discourses.* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1970.) Book 1 Ch. 3
[111] Niccolò Machiavelli, Quentin Skinner, and Russell Price. *Machiavelli: the prince.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 17
[112] Count Carlo Sforza. *The Living Thoughts of Machiavelli.* (London: Cassell, 1942.) 85

from a private station to that rank."[113] Without going further into Machiavelli's

thought, as this is an uncontroversial reading of it, one can point out that Machiavelli

seems to be arguing for a sort of ethical nihilism. War and conflict are certainly

primary characteristics of society. A ruler is not at all encouraged to impose the

good on his people (let alone persuade them), rather he can essentially act however

he wants, with the goals justifying the means, now matter how cruel.

Milbank notes that this Machiavellian civic humanism is similar to Aristotle's

idea of prudence (phronesis),[114] but it reinterprets "political *prudentia* as

instrumental manipulation."[115] Rather than being attached to a traditional virtue

that prescribes how political manipulation should occur or to what goal political

manipulation is the means, power was a taken to be the supreme virtue.[116] Thus, the

raw ability to manipulate is itself the goal, rather than using manipulation to achieve

the good.

The content of virtuous power was defined by a "return to the etymological

root of virtue as 'heroic manliness', to be cultivated supremely in war."[117] This

heroism can be exalted in the "promotion of both internal civic solidarity and

external enmity,"[118] or in the "continued class conflict within the republic [which is]

functionally useful in preserving political 'liberty'."[119] In either case, a conflict of

some sort is both necessary and desirable whether it causes a nation to rise in

power over its enemies or a social class to exert itself against another, which has a

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[113] Machiavelli, *et* al, *Machiavelli: The Prince,* Ch 14
[114] Aristotle, *et* al, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, Ch. 13
[115] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 24
[116] *Ibid*, 25
[117] *Ibid*., 24
[118] *Ibid*.
[119] *Ibid*.

strength building effect. This interplay of constant warring parties is what ensures that "a manipulative bias must be dominant among those who rule."[120] This Machiavellian influence will become clearer when political economy is examined below.

Political Economy

Milbank's account of political economy shows how obviously it was influenced by Machiavelli. His account of political economy also deepens Milbank's claim that liberalism is complicit with violence. In chapter three's discussion of nihilism this will be extended to ontological violence. But what changed in economics is that the philosophy of negative freedom or arbitrary power is extended so that it becomes not only the way one exercises property rights, but also how one deals with other individuals in any circumstance of life.[121]

The general picture of political economy that Milbank paints is that it constructed an "amoral formal mechanism which allows not merely the institution but also the preservation and the regulation of the secular."[122] So it is not that political economy merely studied the formal aspects of economic relations abstracted from morality. The formal economic relations were essentially a new creation, rather than an emancipation of a latent phenomenon. In other words, political economics is simply a contingent non-ethical regulation of the self-preserving impulse, which forgetting its own contingency, simply defines itself as true or pure economics. Anticipating Milbank's conclusions will help to see where he

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[120] *Ibid.*, 25

[121] This is essentially an 18th century phenomenon, explicated in the writings of Adam Smith (1723-1790), Adam Ferguson (1723-1816) and James Stewart (1713-1780).

[122] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 47

is going: he argues that political economy "can be unmasked as agonistics, as theodicy, and as a redefinition of Christian virtue."[123] Thus, its place in this chapter is to show that capitalist economics is actually the product of a pagan mythos, which is Milbank's characteristically dramatic way of saying that it embodies violence of some sort.

Milbank, through his reading of Montesquieu (1689-1755), among others, notes a change in the definition of honor and nobility that was required for political economy to emerge. Traditional aristocratic honor "included a fixed code of behaviour involving moral virtues of courage and magnanimity," but "the new 'bizarre' honour was concerned only with fashion, reputation and appearances."[124]The difference here being that the former held certain objects of desire to be seen as desirable or undesirable based upon a standard, whether theological, philosophical or simply cultural. The goal is to desire the correct things and live accordingly. Whereas for the latter, the goal is simply the "promotion of desire itself, and the manipulation and control of this process."[125] This basically maps onto liberal negative freedom because the ability to exercise desire without interference is maximally important, rather than a positive content as to which desires should be cultivated and acted upon. In other words, a system is set up in which power, the ability to do what one desires without interference, becomes the sole goal or *telos* of a society.

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[123] *Ibid.*
[124] *Ibid.*, 32
[125] *Ibid.*, 33

So, for aristocrats, being honorable is simply to be up to date on all the latest

fads and to appear to honorable, regardless of any substance behind this

appearance. Milbank believes that this is the crucial shift required for people to

begin to think of themselves primarily as producers and consumers. Once the

transcendent *telos* is removed, bodily desire itself becomes the *telos*. People then

merely live to fulfill their desires, consuming the commodities that will produce this

result. The Scottish economist Adam Smith (1723-1790) argues that our desire for

gain is as much about vanity as security or comfort seeking, which paints a picture

of humanity as *homo mercans* (market man), and is to say that each person is

"engaged in a constant struggle to match persuasively his own desire to the desires

of other in the most advantageous manner possible."[126] A new "secular aesthetic"

was born, where "the economy, or the endless 'balancing' of human passions

according to 'the law of supply' and demand', can become an object of desire,

because a new 'classical' beauty has been identified, which consists in the inner

consistency and 'harmony' of the operations of utility."[127] This means that even the

losers of this new economic game are enthralled with it to the degree that they do

not dispute its value.

How this fits into Milbank's argument for why this new capitalism is

necessarily violent becomes apparent when one makes the connection with the

agon of the Greek poet Homer. The agon is "'playful' warfare, within limits according

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[126] *Ibid.*
cf. Smith*, An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations,* Part 4, Ch. 1
[127] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason.* 2nd ed., 34
Cf. "The pleasures of wealth and greatness, when considered in this complex view, strike the
imagination as something grand, and beautiful, and noble, of which the attainment is well worth all
the toil and anxiety which we are so apt to bestow upon it." Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and
Causes of the Wealth of Nations,* Part 4, Ch. 1

to rules and permitting the testing and exercise of a constant ingenuity.[128] As was

noted earlier, Machiavelli believed that warfare between nations and to a lesser

degree between social classes within a nation, was beneficial due to its resulting in

innovative progress. The warfare within a society was problematic for it sounded as

if it would cause as many problems as it would solve. But linking this Machiavellian

theme with the new economics, a brilliant synthesis resulted, for a "fully 'economic'

society provided in an ideal way a ceaseless rivalry in the developing of minutely

discriminating 'taste' and inventive 'ingenuity', without the danger of distinction and

competition spilling over into civil warfare."[129] In other words, the economic society

is "at once a sort of substitute or token for the heroic or military society, and at the

same time, a more perfect fulfillment of the agonistic ideal of a 'lawful' conflict.'"[130] It

is at this point that Milbank's assertion that political economy is complicit with

violence begins to become clear. To be fair, this is not murderous violence; rather it

is a more subtle and pervasive social/political competition in which the members of

society are warring against each other. It is also true that the violence here explored

in capitalism is not necessarily ontological, as it is more of a social theory than a

fundamental metaphysics.

Milbank's fundamental argument here is that liberalism and capitalism,

especially when combined together, are "complicit with an 'ontology of violence', a

reading of the world which assumes the priority of force and tells how this force is

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[128] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 33
[129] *Ibid*., 34-35
[130] *Ibid*., 35

best managed and confined by counter-force."[131] As a philosophy goes, this is

coherent. But Milbank thinks that traditional Christianity cannot buy into this

understanding of reality. This is because Christianity registers violence and force as

a perversion or falling away from a more primary ontological goodness.[132] As such,

liberalism and capitalism could be argued to be philosophies of fallen and sinful

humanity. Thus, they are philosophies to be overcome by Christianity, not ones that

Christianity should look to for understanding the world. Because of this deep

disagreement between Christianity and capitalism, Milbank thinks the church

should challenge it and provide its own alternative.

The connection between capitalism and nihilism must first be made before

talk of capitalism's complicity with ontological violence becomes clear. Chapter

three will take up this theme, showing how nihilism continues the path of economic

competition and negative liberty by reinterpreting them as fundamental ontology,

not merely politics and ethics.

Method of Critiquing the Key Ideas of Secularism

In light of the above analysis, one must question how Milbank is going to set

Christianity against secular social theory. Interestingly, Milbank chooses to take a

more postmodern approach to this task. He believes that one cannot simply argue to

Christianity from certain foundational rational principles that are neutral to one's

tradition of understanding. Instead he argues that "[secularism/nihilism] is only a

mythos, and therefore cannot be refuted, but only out-narrated, if we can *persuade*

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[131] *Ibid.*, 4
[132] *Ibid.*, 365
cf. *Commentary on Dionysius' On the Divine Names*, c. IV, lect. 14 a; *Compendium of Theology,* Ch. 141
in Thomas, *et* al, An *Aquinas Reader*, 54; 162

people – for reasons of 'literary taste' – that Christianity offers a much better story."[133] Therefore, if one wants a modern approach where deductive reasons are used to support an argument for Christianity, then one will be sorely disappointed with Milbank's approach. But if one agrees with his postmodern insistence that the ultimate foundations of traditions of knowing are established by narrative rather than argument, then one will appreciate Milbank's approach.

One must point out that Milbank does not necessarily provide much of a reason for preferring a more Augustinian or Thomist version of Christianity rather than a Scotist or Ockhamist version. His genealogy may be correct in that the theological shifts within the late Middle Ages were necessary steps along the way to liberalism, but this does not decisively establish that late medieval theology after Thomas Aquinas is heresy. So from Milbank's own perspective, describing liberalism as constituted by a Christian heresy does make sense, but only from his assumed perspective. In other words, in order to accept his evaluation of his genealogy of liberalism, one must presuppose that earlier forms of Christian theology are truer to Christianity rather than the later forms, which is something that Milbank does not demonstrate, other than to try to paint a compelling picture of his so called *Postmodern Critical Augustinianism*[134] in a way that is aesthetically pleasing. If one is looking for an extended argument into the nature of true orthodoxy and why late medieval theology departed from this, then one will find Milbank's account lacking.

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[133] *Ibid.*, 331

[134] John Milbank. *"Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A Short Summa in Forty Two Responses to Unasked Questions." Modern Theology* 7, no. 3 (April 1, 1991): 225-237.

Summary

Milbank summarizes his approach to secular social theory when he writes that it is a "disguised heterodoxy of various stripes, as a revived paganism and as a religious nihilism."[135] Milbank essentially means that the autonomy of the secular sphere was created through unfortunate developments in late medieval theology, and that liberalism and capitalism tend to lead towards social/political violence due to the competition between individuals, and that the liberal and Machiavellian approach to ethics is essentially nihilistic, for there is no common good to which one should aim their free choice, economic interests, or political manipulation. So lurking behind Milbank's strong language is the simple proposal that Christianity values charity and peace, while secular social theory devalues charity, defines peace as a lack of open war rather than truly harmonious living, and seems to value selfishness. But it is not entirely clear that secular social theory thus far explored is truly a complete celebration of violence. The capitalist anthropology and economics certainly drift in that direction, but the decisive argument that secularism is complicit with a violent reading of the world can only be achieved if the argument that nihilism is the natural outworking of liberalism is shown to be true. Thus, the full critique of secularism as 'pagan' must be deferred until the subject of nihilism will be taken up in chapter three where postmodern nihilists do indeed argue for this understanding of secular theory.

The overall impression of the present author is that Milbank provides a mostly plausible genealogy of modern social thought especially when supplemented

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[135] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., xiv

by works of his colleagues. But his evaluation of this genealogy (that Duns Scotus and Ockham perverted theology) is much less convincing in that only aesthetic reasons are given for his preference of Augustinian and Thomistic thought. Nonetheless, the comparison between Aquinas and Duns Scotus brings to light the fact that a very large part of a theological response to modernity is bound up in one's interpretation of these two thinkers. Milbank certainly believes that the univocity of being was disastrous for theology and should be rejected, which then opens up Aquinas' philosophy as a live option for questioning secularism. William of Ockham's theology certainly laid a foundation for Thomas Hobbes' political philosophy, which in turn laid a foundation for modern liberalism, the pursuit of freedom/power over all else. The nihilistic turn in capitalistic economics, due to Machiavelli's influence, also played a role in shaping secular culture. Thus, if secularism is constituted by theological premises, it would seem plausible that theology could provide an alternative. The ways in which a more Thomistic theology can aid contemporary theology in challenging secular social theory will become more apparent as the thesis progresses.

Chapter two will discuss the aspect of secular theory that purports to be able to defend the idea that God is an unnecessary consideration for understanding the universe. This is related to the above discussion on Duns Scotus inasmuch as Immanuel Kant will be shown to be arguing from essentially Scotist assumptions. Thus, chapter two further develops chapter one's discussion of the theological constitution of secularism and likewise provides some considerations from the philosophical theology of Thomas Aquinas as counterexamples to Kant's arguments.

From this point, the basis of a secular approach to religion can be challenged. If Christianity can be exonerated from secular reductions, then it has the ability to question the foundations of secular reason. Discussion of this concept will clarify whether John Milbank's project is tenable.

MODERNITY AND RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY

Introduction

A comparison of Immanuel Kant and Thomas Aquinas will bring to the foreground some of the issues that Milbank raises in *Theology and Social Theory.* Secularism and nihilism share in common the idea that substantive knowledge about God or the supernatural is impossible. If this is true, then theology does not have an important role to play in the world. Perhaps it is a private affair that brings one happiness or fulfillment, or perhaps religious people incorrectly think their religion does contain truth about the divine, but in any case, these religious people do not in fact have real knowledge about the divine. The crucial issue here is that theology is automatically relegated to a realm of faith that cannot make any contribution to reasonable discourses on human knowledge. Milbank thinks that this view of theology's domain is incorrect, and thus he seeks to challenge it with a different account of the role of theology.

A comparison of Kant and Aquinas is fruitful here because it brings to light the underlying epistemological claim undergirding both secularism and nihilism. This claim is that the human mind is capable of knowing only finite reality; knowledge of transcendence is simply beyond the capabilities of the human mind. One can picture this as if the human mind was designed specifically to apply only to the finite world of appearances without any recourse to any transcendence that may ontologically support or undergird these appearances. Kant's support for this premise, as will be shown below, is that the human mind is capable of surveying its own boundaries. In other words, although transcendence is beyond the human

mind, one can investigate exactly where human knowledge drops off, and the failing

of human knowledge occurs precisely at the point where one seeks to understand

transcendence.

The importance of this for Milbank's project and for this thesis is that

Aquinas offers a very different understanding of the range of human knowledge,

namely that it can understand transcendence (God, in his case), although Aquinas is

somewhat agnostic about the mechanics of this understanding. Thus, if Aquinas'

position can be shown to be tenable in light of Kant's thought, then Milbank has an

avenue to challenge this aspect of secularism and nihilism, by showing that an

account of how transcendence can be known is just as possible as one in which it

cannot be known.

The importance of Immanuel Kant cannot be overemphasized when

discussing modern philosophy in general and secular thought in particular.[136] But

his influence on theology is perhaps equally vast.[137] While his thought is diverse and

quite complex at times, his importance for this thesis is that he may be seen as the

most decisive figure that completes the previously mentioned Scotist ontological

shift that severed the relation between finite reality and transcendence, creating the

autonomous sphere in which only immanent causes are used to explain both human

political behavior and religion. He argues that transcendence cannot be known by

the human mind other than a vague sort of knowledge obtained through our moral

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[136] "The philosophy of Immanuel Kant is the watershed of modern thought, which irrevocably changed the landscape of the field and prepared the way for all the significant philosophical movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries." Paul Guyer. *The Cambridge Companion to Kant and Modern Philosophy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.) i

[137] Richard Peters. "Immanuel Kant and Theology." *The Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Modern Western Theology.* 2004. (http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/bce/mwt_themes_450_kant.htm)

consciousness, which may support a vaguely deistic ethic of reason and duty, but rules out the Christian vision of the world participating in its creator with an analogy of being between God and the world which makes knowledge of God possible.

This will be linked to some early moments in sociology to demonstrate that they are based upon Kantian presuppositions that if challenged will become suspect. If they are demonstrably questionable, then this will go a long way in explicating why Milbank thinks the reduction of religion to the immanent and private sphere is both problematic and simply dogmatic. This will indicate that secularism's self understanding as a realm of religion-neutral public relations between individuals is no more than one cultural reading of the world. It is metaphysically dogmatic to say that one can map out the point between the immanent and transcendent where human knowledge drops off and beyond which nothing can be known. This opens up the space for Christian theology to challenge secularism and establish that Christianity gives its own account of the relation of creation to the transcendent, which entails the possibility of alternative social theories.

Following this, a brief critique of some of the main schools of sociology will be considered in order to highlight the Kantian transcendentalism that has pervaded much of modern thought. Milbank's critique of Immanuel Kant's transcendental philosophy will be considered as a way of refuting both Kant and his ideological successors. Since sociology is predicated on essentially Kantian or neo-Kantian assumptions about reality, critiquing Kant will serve the purpose of calling into question sociology's self-understanding as a discipline. Again, the critique of

classical sociology is not pursued for its own sake, as the brevity of the discussion

may show, but to illustrate how it reinforces secularism.

Concluding this chapter is a brief account of Derrida's critique of presence,

which essentially argues that stable structures in any account of human knowledge

are always approximations, open to doubt, and often do violence to the realities they

describe. This serves as a segue from chapter two into chapter three.

Immanuel Kant and Thomas Aquinas

Immanuel Kant plays a diverse role in both the construction of modern

thought and in John Milbank's critique thereof, so attempting to pin down Kant's

thought is always challenging. The aspect I will focus on, which is one among many,

is Kant's denial of Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of the analogy of being. The purpose of

this to show that Kant was a seminal figure in defining a worldview in which

transcendence is rigorously denied any sort of presence in the finite world of

experience. Kant drives a wedge between the world and the divine, such that no

reflection upon creation can tell us anything about transcendence. Therefore, any

reference to transcendence in any form of human thought becomes an intellectual

shot in the dark at best or pure deception at worst. The result is that religion in such

a worldview is reinterpreted as having nothing to say about transcendence; thus,

either one's moral consciousness or some sort of aesthetic feeling become the

essence of religion. Milbank's critique of Kant basically involves demonstrating that

Kant gave an account of religious epistemology that made God essentially

unknowable, and indeed ignorable, which is based upon very dogmatic

metaphysical assumptions. Milbank goes as far as to proclaim that Kant is more

metaphysically dogmatic than Aquinas. The critique of Kant reopens the possibility

of human knowledge of the transcendent, no matter how limited; human language

being able to express the transcendent, no matter how inadequately, and

transcendence being able to be in some way embodied in certain cultural practices.

This last point concerning cultural practices' participation in transcendence

becomes key for Milbank's engagement with nihilist philosophy in chapter three.

Immediate to our concerns in the present chapter, Kant's elimination or reduction of

transcendence is key to understanding what Milbank calls sociology's "policing [of]

the sublime."[138] This of course does not serve as a refutation of Kant. Rather it

shows that his critique of religious knowledge only works from within his own

philosophy. Aquinas' philosophy is significantly different such that it does not result

in complete agnosticism concerning God's existence and character.

 For Aquinas, because God created the world and because a creation always

resembles its creator, there is a certain analogy between God and creation.[139] While

there is certainly a great deal of difference between God and creation, what

contemporary philosophy of religion calls the 'ontological difference,' for Aquinas

there is still some sort of similarity no matter how mysterious it may be.[140] This

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[138] Milbank, John. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.) 101

[139] Aquinas wrote, "Whatever perfection exists in an effect must be found in the effective cause: either in the same formality, if it is a univocal agent--as when man reproduces man; or in a more eminent degree, if it is an equivocal agent... Since therefore God is the first effective cause of things, the perfections of all things must pre-exist in God in a more eminent way. Dionysius implies the same line of argument by saying of God (Div. Nom. v): 'It is not that He is this and not that, but that He is all, as the cause of all.'" Thomas Aquinas. *The Summa Theologica.* Second and Revised Edition, 1920 Literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province Online Edition Copyright © 2008 by Kevin Knight. 1.4.2

[140] Wherefore the form of the effect is found in its transcendent cause somewhat, but in another way and another ratio, for which reason that cause is called equivocal. For the sun causes heat in lower bodies by acting according as it is in act; wherefore the heat generated by the sun must needs bear

analogy of being allows for the exchange of predicates between God and creation, even if these predicates do not always mean precisely the same thing when applied to both.[141] One way of understanding Kant is to portray him as destroying this analogy between God and creation, such that knowledge of creation gives no knowledge of God.

It is helpful here to point out the connection between Immanuel Kant and John Duns Scotus. In the previous chapter it was suggested that Duns Scotus created the possibility of understanding creation with no reference to God. While Kant certainly extends this and continues the tradition of epistemological representation, as will be shown below, Kant's whole enterprise also falls in the shadow of Duns Scotus' univocity of being. When Duns Scotus argued that 'being' is applied to both God and creation equally, he began the process of what Gavin Hyman, Lecturer at the University of Lancaster, calls the domestication of God.[142] God's being was on the same level as creation, such that the difference between God and creation could no longer be thought of as qualitative, but as quantitative. Thus, God's being or goodness was no longer qualitatively different than that of creation but God simply possessed infinitely more of them. Hyman traces two distinct directions that this univocity of being took in the centuries after Duns Scotus. The first direction is that of onto-theology, which takes God to be a being among others, with the unfortunate

some likeness to the sun's active power by which heat is caused in those lower bodies and by reason of which the sun is said to be hot, albeit in a different ratio. And thus it is said to be somewhat like all those things on which it efficaciously produces its effects, and yet again it is unlike them all in so far as these effects do not possess heat and so forth in the same way as they are found in the sun. Thus also God bestows all perfections on things, and in consequence He is both like and unlike all. Aquinas, Thomas. *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith = Summa Contra Gentiles.* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1955.) 1.29

[141] Aquinas, *Summa Theologca,.* 1.13.5

[142] Gavin Hyman. *A Short History of Atheism.* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010.) 59

logical result that God is understood as a sort of Superhuman being. The other

direction, more pertinent to the discussion of Kant, is the recognition that onto-

theology is idolatrous, thus God's transcendence must be reintroduced. But this

reintroduction of God's transcendence occurs without Aquinas' metaphysics of

participation, the analogy of being and analogical language. Thus, God's

transcendence is total, such that God resides completely outside creation, creation

gives no hint or partial knowledge of God, and human language therefore is

incapable of saying anything meaningful about God.[143] The above will be more

closely identified with Kant below. While Duns Scotus certainly did not take these

steps in his own writings, his revolution in theology and philosophy made them

possible. In fact, French philosopher Éric Alliez of Middlesex University writes

concerning Duns Scotus, "in effect, once the *primary mover of continuity* (the

Aristotelo-Thomist principle of universal analogy) has been abandoned to the

benefit of a univocal conception of being giving no means to creatures to distinguish

themselves ontologically from God by analogically drawing near him, the distance

between finite and infinite becomes infinite."[144] Again, this is not to say that Duns

Scotus himself believed in the absolute gulf between God and creation, but the logic

of the univocity of being certainly implied it. One can see that these philosophical

moves do not make sense within the background understanding of Thomistic

metaphysics, and thus Kant's Scotist approach will be contrasted with Aquinas

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[143] Hyman writes, "It might be tempting to see Kant as taking a half- turn back to Aquinas and the negative theology, in that he seems once more to emphasise mystery and divine hiddenness and the way in which the existence of God cannot be established by theoretical reason. There is, indeed, a sense in which both Aquinas and Kant preserve a certain agnosticism with respect to God, emphasising the limits of human knowledge with respect to the transcendent world." *Ibid.*, 59-60.
[144] Éric Alliez. *Capital Times*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.) 199

below.

Immanuel Kant and Religious Epistemology

In *Theology and Social* Theory, John Milbank critiques Kant's epistemology.

Therefore, an overview of Kant's epistemology with emphasis on our knowledge of

God will now be explored. Kant summarized his overall approach to human

knowing when he stated:

> Up to now it has been assumed our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about *a priori* through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this pre- supposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition, which would agree better with the requested possibility of an *a priori* cognition of them, which is to establish something about objects before they are given to us.[145]

The key to understanding this quote is to see that if objects conform to our

knowledge then we have within our minds the very structural categories that define

the formal elements of the world. This enables us to engage in speculative

metaphysics, not by trying to read the structure of the world from the contents of

our experience, but by assuming that these structures are the same as those of our

mind, and then by studying our mind.

Proceeding into some of the details of Kant's account of knowledge, there is a

division between form (or category) and content, where contents are the unformed

empirical sensations that enter into our mind through our body, and forms are the

mental categories that automatically organize these contents. These two features

working together in a sort of pre-established harmony is how human experience is

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[145] Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Ed. Paul Guyer, and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.) B xvi

possible.[146] But the difficulty that arises for Kant is that if all human knowledge comes from in-formed contents, then how does knowledge of the pure forms or categories of experience arise? Human subjects must somehow isolate certain parts of their experience and define them as categorical or as the very hinges upon which their experience depends. The possibility of Kant's critical philosophy rests upon the ability of the human subject to do just this, and this is precisely what Milbank contests.

Milbank uses a type of critique similar to that of German Philosopher Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788). Hamann's style of argumentation was not to argue against a writer by giving an opposing account of the matter. Rather, he tended to undermine the assumptions of the author's ideas causing them to simply unravel. In the case of Kant, Hamann argued that Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was simply impossible to carry out.[147] The fundamental issue in whether Kant can be successful is the role that language plays in thought. If there is such a thing as thought unmediated by language then Kant's critique is possible. But if all thought is mediated through language then Kant's forms or categories of human thought are problematic. Milbank writes, "their argument is that because we only think in language, and only grasp the world through language, it is impossible ever to disentangle the knowledge we have of ourselves and through ourselves from our knowledge of the world (or 'nature'), or vice versa."[148] For Kant, the categories of thought reside in the human ego and are forced upon nature; the binary opposition

[146] John Milbank. *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture.* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997) 11
[147] James C O'Flaherty. *Johann Georg Hamann.* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1979.) 82-99
[148] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 149

of ego/nature maps onto the Cartesian dualism of mind/body. Milbank's critique

then, is to deconstruct the dualism by showing that it is arbitrary.

If humans think only in language then investigating the thinking apparatus,

saying what it can or cannot think a priori, is impossible. Milbank says,

> We can *only* know our thinking capacity to the extent that we have thoughts,
> use words, and this means to the extent that we assume we have some
> conception of what 'things' and objective realities are. Hence it is not possible
> to separate out within language the 'categories' – whether of 'reason', the
> 'understanding' or 'the imagination' – by which things are thought, from
> 'intuitions' or the empirical contents of thoughts themselves.[149]

In other words, the flow of experience gives no knowledge of anything beyond itself,

including the process which gives rise to the flow of experience.

The result of this metacritique is that it emphasizes human finitude more

than Kant did, but it also erases the distinction "between 'legitimated' knowledge of

finitude, and illegitimate pretensions to knowledge of the infinite."[150] It is only

because Kant believed that one could take a particular fact "under the judgment of a

stable and universal conceptual framework"[151] that enabled him to justify this

distinction. If it is the case that "one no longer knows that the categories of, for

example, causality, necessity and relation, belong essentially to the framework of

subjective grasp of reality – they are just part of the reality that we deal with and

express,"[152] then Kant cannot discount using these categories analogically to

imagine the infinite and its relation to the finite.

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[149] *Ibid.*, 151
[150] *Ibid.*
[151] *Ibid.*
[152] *Ibid.*, 152

In *Theology and Social Theory,* Milbank is unclear in some elements of his critique of Kant's account of our language's application to transcendence or God. He is very clear about the narrow question of fundamental incoherence in Kant's epistemology as shown above, but the big picture of how all of this relates to theology leaves something to be desired. Milbank supplements this scattered account with a much more focused discussion in his later book *The Word Made Strange.*[153] This discussion, with commentary by Gavin Hyman, will bring the issue into greater clarity.

Gavin Hyman argues that for Milbank, the question of transcendence is expressed most clearly when it is put in terms of two different ways of approaching negative theology (*via negativa).* Basically, Aquinas believed one could have knowledge of God but he was agnostic about the exact relation between God and creation. He believed that we did not need to be able to map out exactly how our knowledge of God worked in order to have true knowledge of God. But Kant took what seems to be the opposite position, in that he was agnostic about God but he was dogmatic about the relation between God and finite reality.[154] For Kant, the relation between God and the finite world is one of rupture, where nothing finite can give any indication of God.[155] In other words, there is a sort of epistemological barrier or boundary between the finite knower and God that cannot be crossed. Gavin Hyman helpfully summarizes,

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[153] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture.*
[154] Gavin Hyman. *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.) 50
[155] Although it must be noted, Kant argued that practical knowledge of God was possible through our moral consciousness, but not through pure or speculative reason.

For Kant, it is possible to stand at the *boundary* of reason and understanding, of noumenon and phenomenon. Unlike a limit, which is primarily negative, a boundary has a positive aspect—to grasp it, one must in a way, stand outside it, even if this standing out is very minimal, as it was for Kant. For Kant knew absolutely that there was an 'other' beyond this boundary but did not know the content of this 'other' or the 'things in themselves.' What Kant did know, however, was that our finite categories could not apply to the 'other.'[156]

But the difficulty with Kant's conjecture here is that it depends on a semi-divinization of the human subject. In order to see beyond the phenomena of everyday experience, there has to be part of the human being that lies outside the categories of phenomenal existence, namely, time, space, efficient causality, etc. As Milbank writes, "it is only because one stands *metaphysically above phenomena* that one is able to determine dogmatically the 'range' of concepts like cause, substance, unity, necessity and so forth."[157] He continues, "Kant was *metaphysically dogmatic* in affirming that they *do not at all* apply [to God and/or transcendence], precisely because he believed (unlike Aquinas) that he had *direct cognitive access in practical reason to what the immaterial and atemporal is like*."[158] The human mind or consciousness itself transcends the phenomena of experience; therefore, it is capable of surveying the boundary between transcendence and phenomena. But, if as Kant maintains, all of our knowledge is empirical content organized by our mental categories that do not apply to transcendence, then it is difficult to see why Kant's philosophy is anything more than the result of a mystical vision that should not be able to be expressed in human thought. In other words, his philosophy violates its own inner logic.

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[156] *Ibid.*, 50
[157] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture*, 11 emphasis added
[158] *Ibid.*, emphasis added to last clause.

While this account of the human mind being outside space and time sounds somewhat ridiculous, Kant thought it was necessary for human freedom to be truly free from physical determination. Historian of Philosophy Frederick Copleston (1907-1994) summarizes the question Kant was trying to answer: "How, for example, can we reconcile with the scientific conception of the world as a law-governed system, in which each event has its determinate and determining course, the world of moral experience which implies freedom?"[159] Thus, Kant was trying to preserve an area of freedom within the human person that was not determined by the efficient causality of a closed system of inert matter. Conor Cunningham, co-director of the Centre of Theology and Philosophy and lecturer at the University of Nottingham, points out that Kant's entire work can be seen as a series of disappearing acts. In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant defined true knowledge and how it can be attained, but by claiming that our knowledge is only of appearances he inadvertently caused the entire world to disappear into the vacuous noumenon. In The *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant placed the human soul outside the physical world to preserve the ego's freedom. In doing this, the physical world with its immutable laws vanishes into epiphenomenalism.[160] This implies that Kant's project does not really solve what it claims to, and that it involves a sort of divinizing of the subject. But this divinizing is necessary for his philosophy because "Kant is only able to delimit the understanding to the finite realm, because he posits a subject which

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[159] Frederick C. Copleston. *A History of Philosophy. Vol. VI. Modern Philosophy: From the French Enlightenment to Kant.* (London: Burns, Oates, & Washbourne, 1951.) 186
[160] Conor Cunningham. *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology.* (London: Routledge, 2002.) 74
The third disappearing act occurs in *The Critique of Judgment*, in which Kant defines beauty in a way that causes it to disappear due to its subjectivity. But this is less applicable to the immediate context.

stands above and *outside* the bounds of this realm, an 'apperceiving' subject which has the power of 'reason'."[161] If nature is conceived as the collectivity of spatio-temporal processes then the human subject (ego) is outside both space and time, yet the human body is within both. This paradox becomes clearer in relation to Kant's notion of sublimity, which is discussed below.

Immanuel Kant and the Sublime

One must also note that although Kant's philosophy seems to lean in an atheistic direction, Kant has a tendency towards a religious outlook in which the sublime takes the place of God.[162] F. C. Copleston summarized Kant's aesthetics of the sublime when he wrote,

> The experience of the sublime, however, is associated with formlessness, in the sense of absence of limitation, provided that this absence of limits is represented together with totality… The sublime, however, does violence to the imagination; it overwhelms it, as it were… The sublime must be said to cause wonder and awe rather than positive joy.[163]

This viewpoint supports the idea of God as an unknowable transcendence that cannot quite be dispensed with and may lurk behind all traditional religions. John Hick's theology certainly tends in this direction.[164] But other commentators suggest that this reading of Kant, while extremely important for understanding much of modern philosophy of religion, falls short of what Kant is truly saying. Instead of the experience of the sublime suggesting a sort of divinity beyond the realm of knowing,

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[161] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason.* 2nd ed., 152

[162] Immanuel Kant and Paul Guyer. *Critique of the Power of Judgment. (*Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000.) § 23-25

[163] Copleston, *A History of Philosophy. Vol. VI. Modern Philosophy: From the French Enlightenment to Kant,* 363-364

[164] John Hick. *God and the Universe of Faiths; Essays in the Philosophy of Religion.* (London: Macmillan, 1973.)

it awakens the human subject to the fact that it stands above and beyond the totality of the universe, as the bridge between the phenomenon and the noumenon.[165] Noted Kant scholar Paul Guyer of the University of Pennsylvania writes, "God's creation is humbled before our free reason, and even the sublimity of God himself can be appreciated only through the image of our own autonomy."[166] Eastern Orthodox theologian and philosopher David Bentley Hart summarizes this darker side of Kant's aesthetics when he writes, "The impression a sober reading of Kant's treatment of the sublime should, in fact, leave is one of extraordinary rationalist triumphalism, a Promethean sense of the self's ultimate transcendence over all of nature, even its most awful and monstrous effects. "[167] For the purposes of this thesis, Milbank clearly takes issue with Kant's account of the transcendence of the subject, arguing that it is as mythical as any religion or speculative philosophy and far from common sense.

Of course, in one sense, the Kantian enterprise is perhaps the perfect expression of a representational epistemology. This means that knowledge is defined in terms of a mimetic doubling between the subject and object, such that an idea is true when it accurately pictures reality.[168] As looking at human knowing in this way has somewhat fallen out of favor since Martin Heidegger's writings, Kant's project feels dated from a postmodern vantage point. As Milbank writes, "One can

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[165] David Bentley Hart. *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth.* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003) 46

[166] Paul Guyer. *Kant and the Experience of Freedom: Essays on Aesthetics and Morality.* (Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press, 1993.) 259. Quoted in, Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth,* 46

[167] *Ibid.*, 46

[168] Pickstock, Catherine. 2005. "Duns Scotus: His Historical and Contemporary Significance*." Modern Theology* 21, no. 4: 543-574. 546

call into question this dualism of organizing scheme and empirical content by suggesting that it is entirely unwarranted to suppose a mass of information somehow coming "into" our mind from 'outside' – once one abandons this picture of a mind as a mirror or receptacle, there is in fact no reason to posit such 'unorganized' material at all. "[169] A more realist account along the lines of Aristotle, in which knowledge consists of an identity between knower and known,[170] can sidestep this Kantian problem of being unable to represent God. Kant's entire project as a critique of Christian metaphysics and epistemology then evaporates.

Kant's account can be contrasted with the earlier medieval outlook, which was influenced by Aristotle as noted above, in which knowledge involved elevation, not merely logical abstraction of formal elements from empirical contents. For Thomistic realism, Catherine Pickstock writes, "the working assumption was the finite occurrence of being (as of truth, goodness, substance, etc.) restricts infinite being in which it participates."[171] Thus, to abstract 'being' or 'goodness' from the individual instances of being or goodness was not simply a separation of a logical concept from its empirical content but a spiritual elevation of the knower to a greater apprehension of the source and exemplar of these qualities. Therefore, Kant's epistemology (following Duns Scotus) is flat and involves only horizontal knowledge, while for Aquinas, epistemology is vertical in that it elevates one to knowledge of transcendence.

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[169] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture*, 11
[170] Aristotle. *Physics.* 202b7-8
cf. James R. Mensch. *Knowing and Being: A Postmodern Reversal.* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996.) 91
[171] Pickstock, *"Duns Scotus: His Historical and Contemporary Significance,"* 546

Nevertheless, one can now see how Kant's refusal to allow any knowledge of God and transcendence led to his successors' attempts to explain both the essence of religion residing elsewhere than transcendence and the tendency to push religion into the sphere of private feeling that does not have any value in the public sphere. Given this critique of Kant, Milbank's arguments against early sociology become clear. The brief consideration of Durkheim and Weber below will serve to illustrate how blatant Kantianism is in secular social theory. This account is necessarily somewhat reductive due to its brevity, but it still demonstrates the essence of Milbank's argument.

Immaneul Kant and Sociology

According to Milbank, sociological thought is predicated upon neo-Kantian assumptions. Milbank writes, "religion is regarded by sociology as belonging to the Kantian sublime: a realm of ineffable majesty beyond the bounds of the possibility of theoretical knowledge, a domain which cannot be imaginatively represented, and yet whose overwhelming presence can be acknowledged by our frustrated imaginative powers."[172] The major objection that Milbank has to this view of religion is that it forces religion to the margins of societal/cultural understanding. It prevents particular religions from modifying the structure of society. In effect, religion is incarcerated into some pre-existing mold, which keeps society safe from its influence. Hence Milbank's phrase "Policing the Sublime."[173] The following comments are brief but they are designed simply to show that many Kantian themes

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[172] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 104
[173] *Ibid*., Chapter 5

appear in the major sociologists. Emile Durkheim and Max Weber will be considered

below.

For Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), one of the fathers of sociology, the social is

the site of what Milbank calls the "finite presence of the Kantian 'kingdom of ends': it

sanctifies and embodies the sublime freedom of every individual within the

state."[174] In other words, the social sphere is a reification of the negative liberal

freedom of individuals and a glorification of human transcendence over the world.

The corresponding definition of 'society' in its technical sense is:

> the *a priori* schema[175] which supplies the categorical universals under which
> are to be comprehended all empirical contents. Traditional and particular
> religions are thought to encode in a non-perspicuous fashion this priority of
> the social, and only insofar as this is recognized is religion itself universalized
> and brought to perfection.[176]

The negative side of this definition is that any religion that conceals the priority of

the social is imperfect and tainted to the extent that it does so. And any religion that

protests this reduction to the social and argues that its own ideas give the true

universal picture of reality is automatically marginalized as being the furthest thing

from a universal religion. Only a religion that specifically self-understands itself as a

mere glorification of the social and provides no institutions to cover this up, only

this religion can be true, universal and perfect. One has to admit the ingenuity of

Durkheim's sociological construction, for any religion that protests against his

scheme is automatically registered as primitive. Therefore, for religion to survive, it

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[174] *Ibid.*, 103

[175] Durkheim called these "social facts." He wrote, "a social fact is every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations. Émile Durkheim, Steven Lukes, and W. D. Halls. *The Rules of Sociological Method.* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1982.) 13

[176] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 103

has to stop protesting and accept Durkheimian sociology. In which case, one wonders whether any religion that does so can survive this reinterpretation.

For Max Weber (1864-1920), another founder of the discipline of sociology, sociology is Kantian in a different way than Durkheim's. Rather than *a priori* social facts that govern people's actions being the foundation for sociology, "the social itself is to be known *a priori* in terms of the primacy of instrumental reason and economic relationship."[177] Here capitalism as elucidated in chapter one is the way humans normally act. Religion is essentially charisma that interrupts the rationality of instrumental reason and economics,[178] but which has no intrinsic logic of its own. Without belaboring this point, Weber sees religion as ultimately having no theoretical content; it is empty charisma or emotion that disrupts ordinary reason.

For both Durkheim and Weber societies are categorized "in terms of the relation of the individual to something social and universal."[179] Milbank also rightly notes how this maps onto liberalism's attempt to understand the relation of the sovereign state and the self-will of the individual.[180] But one of the more questionable aspects of sociology is its insistence on the primacy of " the binary individual/society contrast."[181] Many pre-modern and non-western societies are better understood as being defined by "the hierarchical ordering of different status groupings, and the distribution of roles according to a complex sense of common

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[177] *Ibid.*, 103
[178] Kieran Allen. *Max Weber: A Critical Introduction*. (London: Pluto Press, 2004.) 106-109
Bryan S. Turner. *Max Weber: From History to Modernity*. (London: Routledge, 1993.) 7
[179] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 103
[180] *Ibid.*
[181] *Ibid.*

value."[182] The individual/society contrast is notably absent but sociology is relentless and emphasizes the fact that these hierarchical societies exercise a great deal of control over individuals, thus enforcing the stability of the whole. But interpreting hierarchical groupings as "societies" that sociology can study distorts these hierarchies to the extent that they differ from whatever "social facts" are taken to be fundamental.

Therefore, the categories of distinctly modern politics are taken to be the universal key to any social circumstance. So for any possible society, "all the complex rituals, hierarchies, and religious views which go to make up a stratified, organic society can be 'explained' in terms of their functional maintaining of strong control of the whole over the individual parts."[183] Milbank thinks that this view is only possible because of the hypostatization of social relations. In the middle between individuals and society is a mysterious ether of "pure 'social action', [and] pure 'social power.'"[184] These social relations are universal, and become encoded into different cultural practices and linguistic manifestations. But Milbank's point is that these 'pure' social relations are reifying abstractions. Thus, "there is no 'social action' definable or comprehensible apart from its peculiar linguistic manifestation, the inexplicability of a particular symbolic system."[185] If Milbank is correct, then rather than laying bare the hidden nature of non-modern and non-western societies, sociology actually distorts them all, painting them with the same brush.

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[182] *Ibid.*
[183] *Ibid.*
[184] *Ibid.*, 104
[185] *Ibid.*

Since particular religions are made up of varying customs which are eccentric and bound to time and place, they are what Milbank calls a "constant repetition of the singular."[186] There is no obvious universal standing behind them. But sociology claims to have discovered a regularity behind these various singular repetitions. Just as a traditional society gets re-interpreted as manifestations of a universal society type, so also is "the particularity of its religion, the *kind* of organic whole which it is, the *content* of its hierarchy of values, will be subordinated and even ascribed to the mere general fact of its being strongly cohesive."[187] But there is a potential here for great misunderstanding. For 'particular religions' are the subject of this sociological reduction. Like liberal theology, sociology wants to preserve a "'real' essence of religion" which has nothing to do with the "power-dimension of society, its relationships of action," but merely with a sphere of "'value' which justifies and legitimates social action and power.[188] It is important to point out here that in traditional societies value is intertwined with power and action in all of its complexity.

But more fundamental than even the individual/whole dualism is the Kantian transcendentalism lurking in the background. Social facts are analogous to Kant's *a priori* forms of human understanding. One looks at the flux of experience and chooses certain features within it and elevates them to the level of structures that organize everything else. Durkheim does just this with his "social facts." But if one questions the possibility of non-arbitrarily isolating certain parts of experience

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[186] *Ibid.*
[187] *Ibid.*
[188] *Ibid.*

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as structural, then the technical understanding of "society" is incoherent and

sociology as a discipline dissolves into historiography.[189] Of course, my above

analysis does not in fact establish this conclusively. Milbank devotes much attention

to this issue that cannot be explored more here. But the above does establish that

"society" as such is Kantian and deeply questionable from a Thomistic perspective.

Following from this, one can only list all the *a priori* forms of human

understanding, social facts in this narrow case, if one is able to transcend these

forms of understanding and see the invisible sublime.[190] Or as Ludwig Wittgenstein

(1889-1951) at Cambridge wrote, "in so far as people think they can see the "limit of

human understanding", they believe of course that they can see beyond it."[191] Thus,

the paradox of classical sociology becomes clear: if social facts are formal structures

rather than time and culture specific habits, then one can only know this by

transcending all times and cultures and "seeing" the un-seeable categories or laws

that lie behind them. This is, as stated above in reference to Kant, simply rationalist

triumphalism.

While so far Milbank seems to call attention to the foundational issues of

classical sociology, other thinkers are not so convinced that this applies to all of later

sociological thought. Robert Schreiter of the Catholic Theological Union writes,

> One should concur with some of Milbank's deconstruction of the origins of
> sociology (and I daresay many social scientists might agree). But I think that
> (a) Milbank assumes more methodological and theoretical unity in the field
> than there is, and (b) overestimates the autonomy of the social sciences.[192]

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[189] *Ibid*., 105
[190] *Ibid*.
[191] Ludwig Wittgenstein, G. H. von Wright, and Heikki Nyman. *Culture and Value*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980.) 22
[192] Robert J. Schreiter. "From Postmodernity to Countermodernity: John Milbank's Undertaking." *Continuum* (St. Xavier College (Chicago, Ill)) 3, (January 1, 1994): 286-303. 301

This is important because it chastens what is actually at stake in Milbank's critique of classical sociology. It may rest upon assumptions of what the human mind is capable of knowing, i.e. Kant's view of the sublime and the human subject's transcendence of the material world, but much of contemporary social theory may not in fact depend upon these Kantian assumptions. To the extent that social theory goes beyond the form/content dualism of Kant's philosophy, it also goes beyond the scope of Milbank's critique.

John Milbank and Jacques Derrida: the Structures of Human Knowing

The major premise in Milbank's critique of modern social thought (as opposed to postmodern) is that it tends to build its edifice of knowledge upon a structural foundation that is completely stable. Since Milbank is quite situated in the postmodern era of theology, he finds this very problematic. No doubt this comes from the influence of French Philosopher Jacques Derrida's (1930-2004) philosophy. For Derrida, all of reality is in constant flux.[193] The idea of erecting a structure that stabilizes this flux, or steps out of it onto solid ground, is simply impossible. But as was mentioned above, Kant certainly introduces structural stability into human knowing, for the human subject applies certain formal and stable mental structures to the world of experience, which brings stability and

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[193] Referring to his concept of différance, Derrida wrote, "The activity or productivity connoted by the a of différance refers to the generative movement in the play of differences. The latter are neither fallen from the sky nor inscribed once and for all in a closed system, a static structure that a synchronic and taxonomic operation could exhaust. Differences are the effects of transformations, and from this vantage the theme of différance is incompatible with the static, synchronic, taxonomic, ahistoric motifs in the concept of structure." Jacques Derrida, Alan Bass, and Henri Ronse. *Positions.* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 28

objectivity to human knowing.[194] Derrida happens to think that it is impossible to

avoid creating hierarchies and structures that govern how we approach the world,

for it seems that in order to know the flux of reality, we always have to try to

stabilize it by means of certain structures we impose on it.[195] But if one is honest,

then one must admit that these structures we create are mere cultural

contingencies, accidents of history that do not map onto any necessary structure

that objectively exists in the world. This is not to say that one can know nothing of

the world, but that simply that discourses that claim to divide the world into precise

categories do violence to the world insofar as they think they are objectively true.

Derrida's critique of presence basically entails that the meaning of any term

is situated by its difference from other words, and that trying to define a word

involves a deferral to other words which are supposed to give meaning to the first.

Derrida wrote, "an element functions and signifies, takes on or conveys meaning,

only by referring to another past or future element in an economy of traces."[196] Or

as Milbank summarizes, the signs within our language "do not denote pre-existing

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[194] "[U]p until the event which I wish to mark out and define, structure-or rather the structurality of structure-although it has always been involved, has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin. The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure-one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure-but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the freeplay of the structure. No doubt that by orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the freeplay of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself." Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978.) 278

[195] "When I say that this phase is necessary, the word phase is perhaps not the most rigorous one. It is not a question of a chronological phase, a given moment, or a page that one day simply will be turned, in order to go on to other things. The necessity of this phase is structural; it is the necessity of an interminable analysis: the hierarchy of dual oppositions always reestablishes itself. Unlike those authors whose death does not await their demise, the time for overturning is never a dead letter." Derrida, *et* al, *Positions*, 40-41

[196] Derrida, Interview with Julia Kristeva in *Positions*, 28

realities, but are caught up in a chain of connotations that can be infinitely

extended."[197] So an isolated sign does not have a positive meaning; its meaning is

only determined within the game of the play of signs. There is no "original 'presence'

of a thing or thought" that can be isolated and given its own positive meaning.[198]

Derrida's neologism "différance," an intentional misspelling of the French word

différence, plays upon the fact that the French word *différer* means both "to differ"

and "to defer." Any word we try to pin down and define is always caught up in a

chain of deferrals in which we define our original term by relating it to other terms.

But these terms also must be defined if the original term is to have meaning in

relation to them. This deferral of meaning goes on *ad infinitum*, suggesting that signs

are never truly given a static meaning because the other signs that situate them are

multiplied endlessly. Therefore, the task of defining a word rigorously is impossible.

Our connotative pre-understanding, our overall culture and religion, our

native language, etc., always contaminates the pure 'presence' of a thing or idea.

Thus, Milbank summarizes Derrida's linguistic philosophy as the idea that "the

transcendental premise of all language is a logic of 'supplement' and 'deferral.'"[199]

The deferral of meaning is what a rejection of logical atomism entails, for nothing

can be considered on its own, but only makes sense within a network of broader

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[197] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 310

[198] Derrida wrote, "the *a* of *différance* also recalls that spacing is temporization, the detour and postponement by means of which intuition, perception, consummation - in a word, the relationship to the present, the reference to a present reality, to a being - are always deferred. Deferred by virtue of the very principle of difference which holds that an element functions and signifies, takes on or conveys meaning, only by referring to another past or future element in an economy of traces. This economic aspect of *différance*, which brings into play a certain not conscious calculation in a field of forces, is inseparable from the more narrowly semiotic aspect of différance." Derrida, *et* al, *Positions*, 28

[199] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 310

relation. Kant may indeed believe he found the forms of experience, but Kant does not, and according to Derrida, cannot stabilize these forms in any meaningful way. The flux of reality is too messy, and the human subject is too situated in particularity, which means that finding isolatable structures within experience that are not open to revision is impossible. Understanding the crucial shift in how one approaches epistemology has a very important effect upon how one understands religion and critiques it.

Modern vs. Postmodern Critiques of Religion

One way of stating the modern critique of religion, following Milbank's lead, is to say that it built its own philosophy that categorizes the world in various ways, depending on the thinker in question. But religion did not play a foundation role in these categories, and certainly could not question them, thus it was explained (or explained away) by referring it to more basic categories of human existence. As Milbank writes, "In the older, modern mode of suspicion, the problem was, 'isn't religion really x?' An x which is more basic, though concealed. Isn't it really a function of social control, really a means of discipline for production, really an aspect of the psyche's suppression of the unacceptable?"[200] But if structural categories that govern human knowledge and experience can be doubted, then the modern critique of religion becomes irrelevant, giving rise to a qualitatively different postmodern critique. Examples of modernity's structural understanding of the world and religion can be multiplied endlessly, thus no attempt to give a precise cartography is possible here. The few thoughts offered above on the foundations of

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[200] *Ibid.*, 260

classical sociology serve as just one example of dozens that could be given. But the fundamental issue is whether structure stability is possible. Milbank and most postmodern theorists argue that it is not.

Therefore, for postmodernity, because there is no stable ground upon which to mount an assault of religious truths, it "cannot demythologize, nor question the content of belief over against a standard of truth. It can, however, relativize and question claims to universality. Its more insidious method reveals no secret behind the mythos, but merely points to other 'truths', and shows how these are suppressed or denied by a totalizing perspective."[201] Thus, the postmodern approach is to argue that religion is merely one cultural/historical/linguistic ordering of human understanding that is used to make sense of the flux of the world (*différance* in Derrida's case). This will be taken up in more detail in chapter three, in which it will be examined how "the obvious implication of 'many truths', or rather 'many incommensurable truths', is that every truth is arbitrary, every truth is the will-to-power."[202] Postmodern nihilism will be examined to show that it offers a narrative of how to understand the world. But the question of whether it gives an account that can truly challenge Christianity or simply says something different than Christianity will be answered in chapter three.

Summary

The importance of Immanuel Kant and sociology for this thesis is the extent to which they provide a theoretical framework for understanding secular social

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[201] *Ibid*, 261
[202] *Ibid*.

theory. It is primarily constituted by Kant's transcendentalism— any discourse that believes in the possibility of a priori knowledge of the conditions of experience— which is manifested in a form/content dualism in which certain non-empirical forms govern empirical data.[203] By showing this form/content dualism to be deeply problematic, Milbank opens up the space to challenge all secular reason that is Kantian in the above-mentioned fashion. Now this is a very modest achievement, for Milbank does not in fact refute Kant. He merely shows that Kant gives a different account of knowledge and reality than Aquinas. Thus, as far as secular social theory depends heavily on Kant, it will give a different account of religion than someone following the lead of Aquinas. But somewhat curbing Milbank's rhetoric that he has destroyed sociology, one must remember that the central paradox of classical sociology, that the human subject must transcend cultural and language bound reasoning, is completely consistent with Kant's account of the sublime. Therefore, it is not refuted strictly speaking. One could say that any social theory based upon these Kantian assumptions is as metaphysically dogmatic as any Christian metaphysic or social theory. But this merely opposes Christianity to secular social theory; it sets up an alternate metaphysical vision that has its own views of society, ethics, etc.

One misunderstands Milbank's thought as a whole if one reads him as somehow destroying secular social thought. His point is simply that if one approaches any discipline transcendentally, in the above used sense, then one must

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[203] Thomas Mautner. *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*. (London: Penguin Books, 2005.) 622
This is not to be confused with the transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller.

also believe in the transcendence of the human subject. This is a propaedeutic to understanding nihilism, which is taken up in the next chapter. For while postmodern nihilist philosophers are less rigidly Kantian because they let individual cultures be understood on their own terms without a strict underlying formal scheme, Milbank will argue that nihilism is a covert transcendentalism because its main theorists see 'violence' as the form governing all of experience. But the postmodern insistence that all knowledge is culturally and linguistically bound seems to reject the Kantian transcendence of the subject. Chapter three also looks at how nihilism repeats Kant's departure from Aquinas' metaphysics of participation and analogy in favor of a metaphysics in which the mundane world is always a betrayal of its source.

Here at the end of chapter two, a transition has occurs. Chapters one and two deal with modern forms of secularism, while chapter three will encounter postmodern secularism. Chapter one looked at the theological origins of secularism, which served the purposes of finding the religious inception of the founding ideas of secularism, and similarly locating the focal points that a Christian critique of secularism would have to challenge. The theology of Thomas Aquinas, broadly considered, was quite capable of providing an alternative to secular approaches. Chapter two dealt with the fundamental arguments that purported to show the problematic nature of invoking the divine or transcendence in the public sphere of reason. This was shown to be dogmatic, to which one could oppose an alternate account that does allow for the intermixing of transcendence within the finite order. The structural elements of epistemology were examined to see the way in which the

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postmodern critique of presence (stability) renders structural accounts of knowledge arbitrary. Thus, any structural construction can always be deconstructed into arbitrary ways of dividing the world. Therefore, Christianity need not take any of these modern categories for understanding the world as fundamental to the world itself. This leads to the great advantage of giving Christianity a space in which to reassert itself. But it also opens the space to be suspicious of everything theology says, because Christianity is just one more discourse that constructs its own arbitrary systems of meaning. This leads into the postmodern nihilism of chapter three, in which one must sort out whether the collapse of modernity and its structures of knowing entail the collapse of the plausibility of a Christian critique of secularism.

THEOLOGY AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF DIFFERENCE

Introduction

According to John Milbank, postmodern nihilism is the new secularism. Therefore, for this thesis, which seeks to evaluate Milbank's critique and alternative to secularism, understanding postmodern nihilism is the final pre-requisite to critique Milbank's claims in *Theology and Social Theory*. If Milbank is successful in showing that Christianity can be a true alternative to postmodern nihilism, then his project gains more plausibility. In the previous chapter it was briefly shown why Derrida thought modernity was deeply problematic. If Derrida is correct that no stable categories of human understanding exist, due to their temporality and cultural situatedness, then the modern secular project of giving a complete narrative of reality gives way to a new secular project that does not define its terms in rigid structural categories. Rather it must seek a new path which admits that at best philosophers and other theorists come up with smaller narratives that do not claim universality. Jean -François Lyotard, the first chronicler of postmodernity, summed up this attitude when he wrote, "the grand narrative has lost its credibility."[204] Or similarly, "simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives."[205] The result of this is that for postmodernism, "the social subject itself seems to dissolve in the dissemination of language games. The social bond is linguistic, but is not woven with a single thread. It is a fabric formed by the intersection of at least two (and in reality an indeterminate number) of language

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[204] Jean-François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.) 37
[205] *Ibid*., xxiv

games, obeying different rules."[206] Thus, postmodernity can be thought of as a sort

of pluralism, which admits many different perspectives upon the nature of reality.

Milbank thinks that the nihilist philosophers do something very clever with

the above claim about plurality. They argue from the manifold perspectives on truth,

which are essentially incommensurable (non-overlapping) language games with no

objective criteria to decide between them, to the conclusion that "the ultimate over-

arching game is the play of force, fate, and chance."[207] The key here is to see how a

skeptical attitude admits the limitation of every cultural/religious/linguistic

understanding of reality, such that truth is always bound to a particular tradition or

perspective. But a plurality of traditions and perspective exist, therefore

contradictory and ultimately incommensurate ways of understanding the world

exist side by side. While this is undoubtedly true, this observation regarding the

plurality of worldviews can be transformed into the idea that these worldviews are

part of an even larger background worldview in which the differences between the

smaller worldviews always result in violence between warring worldviews. It is

tempting to call this 'epistemological capitalism' for all worldviews are stripped of

their value, because none can be completely true, and they are in an endless

competition in which each worldview self-asserts itself against all others.

For Milbank, this is simply the creation or narration of a new worldview or

myth—namely, the metanarrative of ontological violence. But there is a gap in the

reasoning that connects difference to violence, for although differences may exist it

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[206] *Ibid.*, 40

[207] Milbank, John. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.) 279

does not follow that the relation between differences is necessarily violent, and even if violence is present in the world, it does not follow that it is ontologically primary. As Milbank writes, one could "put forward an alternative *mythos,* equally unfounded, but nonetheless embodying an 'ontology of peace', which conceives differences as analogically related, rather than equivocally at variance."[208] Of which of course violence would be an intrusion. The task at hand then, is to deconstruct nihilism by revealing it to be simply another metanarrative that seeks to understand all of reality under the rubric of a new metaphysic, and exposing these metaphysical constructions of the various nihilist philosophers as essentially variations on a single theme—an ontology of violence.

Milbank has in a sense hijacked this postmodern critique of modernity, agreeing that modernity does not make sense, but he goes a step further and rejects postmodernity in favor of Christian orthodoxy. He rejects postmodernity because of the nihilism and violence he thinks are contained within it. The crucial question then is whether Milbank can legitimately use postmodern philosophy to destroy modernity but then reject postmodernity in favor of orthodoxy. For if postmodernity is not valid, then one wonders how its critique of modernity could be correct. Achieving a satisfactory answer to this question will involve explicating just what postmodern nihilism is and what it claims to explain, and exploring why Milbank thinks its critique of modernity is true and useful even if he ends up rejecting postmodern thought. It will be argued that Milbank sees nihilism's value in that it correctly challenges certain ideas bound up in modern philosophy that

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[208] *Ibid*.

Christianity really has no business accepting. Therefore, postmodernity rightly

points out many problems with modernity, but according to Milbank Christianity

can give better answers.[209] Essentially what Milbank does is accept that

postmodernity is correct that finite reality is always in flux, and that our language

can never pin down reality in such a way that we completely comprehend it,[210] but

he stops at the point where this is supposed to imply that reality is fundamentally

violent. Thus, the point of this chapter is to explore postmodern nihilism because it

is a new face of the secular, then to show that a broadly Augustinian or Thomist

Christian perspective can provide an alternative that avoids the violent conclusions

of nihilism.

Philosophy of Difference

While nihilism strictly speaking is a philosophy of nothing (*nihil*), Milbank's

polemics with nihilism are more specifically directed to the fact that he thinks

nihilism dogmatically makes violence the key to understanding reality. Conor

Cunningham summarizes the very heart of nihilistic philosophy when he writes:

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[209]"The strategy therefore, which the theologian should adopt, is that of showing that the critique of presence, substance, the idea, the subject, causality, thought-before-expression, and realist representation do not necessarily entail the critique of transcendence, participation, analogy, hierarchy, teleology, and the Platonic Good, reinterpreted by Christianity as identical with being." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 297

[210] "I think that many postmodern theories… have questioned the idea that you can get determinate meaning and clear certainty in any human field. So there has been a strong insistence all the time that when you think you've got definite meaning, or some clearly grasped area of value, you're deluding yourself, and in fact you're suppressing the questions, the ambiguities that always remain. And part of our case is that involves the claim that theology is on the side of indeterminacy, and of a certain authentic and inescapable vagueness, because if we live in a created universe which only reflects in multiple finite ways an infinite plenitude of meaning, then there is a sense in which everything is always somewhat partial and uncertain, veiled, fragmentary and never foreclosed." "Radical Orthodoxy: A Conversation" in: Simon Oliver, and John Milbank. *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader.* (London: Routledge, 2009.) 32

It is possible to argue that the logic of nihilism is made manifest in the age-old metaphysical (ontotheological) question: why something rather than nothing? The logic of nihilism reads this question with a particular intonation. That is, why something? Why not nothing? *Why can the nothing not do the job of the something?* This leads me to define the logic of nihilism as a sundering of the something, rendering it nothing, and then having the nothing be after all as something.[211]

While this is true, and will be hinted at in the following section *Ontological Difference*, the fact that ultimate reality is the Nothing seems to be only in the background of Milbank's mind, for he focuses on the nihilism's extolment of difference. One can only speculate why Milbank's does not focus on the question of 'nothing' in regard to nihilism. But perhaps it has to do with the fact that in the more mystical traditions of Christianity God is often said to be nothing. For example, Meister Eckhart stated, "Whoever speaks of God by [using the term] *nothing* speaks of him properly."[212] Of course he is not saying that Christianity is atheistic, rather that God is beyond being; God is literally no-thing. So at a surface level, the debate between Christianity and nihilism is not whether the source of being is nothing, for both agree. Thus, the debate is about the character of this nothingness. This leads to the question of difference.

Postmodern nihilism can be explained as a philosophy of difference.[213] This is not because any philosophy that values difference is nihilistic, but rather that nihilist philosophers see themselves as recovering difference from previous

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[211] Conor Cunningham. *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology.* (London: Routledge, 2002.) xiii

[212] Mesiter Eckhart, Bernard McGinn, Frank J. Tobin, and Elvira Borgstädt. *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher.* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1986.) 323

[213] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 5

philosophies that obscured it.[214] British theologian Graham Ward of Oxford University summarizes the modern eclipse of difference when he writes, "all that is is visible; there is nothing hidden, occult, or mysterious. All things exist insofar as their properties are perceptible and an account can be made of them; as such, all things are inert. This is a non-mythical form of realized eschatology: the truth of what is fully present and presenced."[215]

A problematic element in this modern eclipse of difference comes to light when the issue is put it in terms of Derrida's critique of presence or stability in epistemology, which was elaborated upon in the previous chapter. If structural and hierarchical categories are always somewhat misleading and do violence to whatever is being discussed,[216] then one can ask the question whether there is something beyond or on the outside of the structure that is ignored. This questioning leads to the postmodern obsession with terms such as difference, otherness and alterity. Is there anything beyond our culturally constructed categories of understanding, something completely different from us that we cannot help but distort into our own categories? Is this 'beyond' people outside one's native culture, or the source of being, or something else entirely? These are the questions that drive the postmodern quest for difference.

This preference for 'difference' can be explained in three ways.[217] First, there is the ontological difference, which is the difference between the totality of the finite

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[214] Gavin Hyman. *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.) 124
[215] Graham Ward. *Michel de Certeau's 'Spiritual Spaces,' New Blackfriars* 79 (1998): 429
[216] Jacques Derrida. *Of Grammatology.* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.) 112
[217] These three ways of describing difference are not meant to be exhaustive. They are simply convenient ways of organizing the topic at hand.

world and its source.[218] The second is the difference between actuality and

possibility.[219] The third is ontic difference— the difference between individual finite

beings.[220]

Ontological Difference

German philosopher Martin Heidegger made the ontological difference

popular in recent philosophy. If one believes in an ontological difference, then one

believes there is a source of all things that is qualitatively different than individual

objects.[221] There is a tendency for this to be somewhat mystical, suggesting that the

source of being is non-spatial and a-temporal, yet integrally present within the

world as the source and density of finite things. In other words, the question that

drives philosophies of difference is whether appearances are all there is, or whether

there is something hidden behind the appearances giving and sustaining their

existence. American philosopher John Caputo of Syracuse University very

illuminatingly compares Martin Heidegger and Meister Eckhart on this point, for it

shows that the debate between Christianity and nihilism actually presupposes a

great deal of agreement, for they both see a mystical source behind the world that in

some way shines through the world if one looks with a proper attitude.[222] The

disagreement between nihilism and Christianity concerns the identity or character

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[218] The difference between beings and Being is the area within which metaphysics, Western thinking in its entire nature, can be what it is. Martin Heidegger. *Identity and Difference*. (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1969.) 51

[219] This point is quite obscure, but Milbank makes much of it in: Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 307-309

[220] This will be connected with Deleuze as a prime example.

[221] The Being of entities 'is' not itself an entity... *what is to be found out by the asking-the* meaning of Being-also demands that it be conceived in a way of its own." Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time.* (New York, NY: Harper, 1962.) 26

[222] John D. Caputo. *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought.* (Athens: OH: University Press], 1978.) xvii-xix

of this mystical source. Is it an abyss of darkness or of light?[223] Is it a giver of life that

freely and lovingly donates its own being to create something genuinely other than

itself? Or is it a dark void that indifferently spits out a world that has no inherent

rhyme, reason, or value? Or as Milbank accuses Heidegger of putting it, is the world

the result of an ontological fall or rupture from its source?[224] If so, then nihilism

understands the relationship between the world and its source as one of violence,

rather than a gift from God.

Milbank's understanding of the overall issue bound up in the ontological

difference is summed up in the introduction to *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*:

> The central theological framework of radical orthodoxy is 'participation' as
> developed by Plato and reworked by Christianity, because any alternative
> configuration perforce reserves a territory independent of God. The latter
> can lead only to nihilism (though in different guises). Participation, however,
> refuses any reserve of created territory, while allowing finite things their
> own integrity.[225]

As indicated, participation is the key to understanding the difference between

Christianity and nihilism's approaches to the source of being.

Aquinas gives an explicit summary of this aspect of his thought when he

wrote, "being is predicated essentially only of God, inasmuch as the divine existence

(esse) is an existence (esse) that is subsistent and absolute. But being is predicated

of every creature by participation, since no creature is its own existence (esse) but is

something having an existence."[226] So far, nihilism seems to agree with the

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[223] Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology*, 221
[224] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 302
[225] John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward. *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology.*
(London: Routledge, 1999.) 3
[226] *Debated Questions* II, q. 2, a. 3(1). In Aquinas, Saint Thomas, and Mary T. Clark. *An Aquinas Reader.*
(Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1972.) 73

sentiment expressed here, but disagrees with the theistic language. What truly

separates Christianity and nihilism is whether creation can participate in its origin

in an aspect other than 'being.' Aquinas wrote, "we also say that God is good

essentially, since he is goodness itself, but we say that creatures are good by

participation, since they have goodness. Now, *anything and everything insofar as it*

exists, is good."[227] Whether or not things are simply good because they exist, and

whether they receive this existence and goodness from participating in God is the

central question in understanding Milbank's characterization of nihilism over

against Christianity. For nihilism, the source of being is either not good, or the finite

world does not participate in it. Jacques Derrida will serve as an example of this

mentality.

It is helpful to portray Derrida's philosophy as playing with two important

concepts: the "text" and "nothing." Indeed as Derrida wrote, "there is nothing

outside of the text."[228] Now in context this means simply that things are only

understood in context, in which nothing is outside. But Conor Cunningham notes

how this quote from Derrida also serves as a summary for his ontology, though he is

pulling it out of context. He suggests that one can think of the text as the world of

appearances, and the nothing as the origin of the text. Thus, "there is nothing

outside the text," means that there is indeed a nothingness outside the text that is

the origin of the text. One may compare the nothing outside the text to the Greek

philosopher Plotinus' non-being outside of being. Plotinus' "One" is not just beyond

being, but also beyond thought (*nous*). Being is a necessary emanation from the One,

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[227] *Ibid.*
[228] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. 158

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which is the ground of all things.[229] But the One is beyond being, therefore the One is

non-being or "nothing." If one thinks of the physical world as fundamentally textual,

then the text is grounded in nothing (non-being/The One).[230]

This sets up a duality between the origin, also called arche-writing, and the

trace, which is simply any linguistic system or thing contained therein. Derrida

wrote, "arche-writing … cannot, as the condition of all linguistic systems, form a part

of the linguistic system itself and be situated as an object in its field."[231] As ground of

all writing, it resides outside writing. The concept of the 'trace' becomes important

as the imprint, residue, footprint, etc., of arche-writing. In other words the trace is

simply the text, or something contained within the text. Derrida wrote, "The trace is

not only the disappearance of origin… it means that the origin did not even

disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the

trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin."[232] This has an important

implication for Milbank. Mediation between the trace and arche-writing is denied,

for the transcendence of the arche-writing is thought of as absence, rather than a

presence by participation.

What we have here are two competing metaphysical visions. One grounds the

goodness of the finite world in an exemplary source of goodness, while the other

grounds being in a transcendent source with no reference to goodness. Both seem to

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[229] Cunningham, Conor. *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology,* xv

[230] Eli Diamond of Dalhousie University writes, "For both Plotinus and Heidegger, the Nothing is the impetus of our approach to what is most real in the world, although beyond essence and existence: the One, or Being. This is also an important point in Derrida's analysis." Quoted in Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology,* 155

[231] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 60

[232] *Ibid.,* 61

function at the same level; one does not raise a question that the other cannot answer. Rather they both approach the same issue simply from different perspectives. These different perspectives lead to widely divergent social theories. Therefore, this fits into the thesis as a whole because it is seen here that Christianity is an alternative to nihilism, thus giving at least initial support to Milbank' claims that Christianity can understand the world in its own terms.

Milbank's second argument is that the nihilistic understanding of ontological difference may possibly be more monistic than nihilism readily admits. Whether the source of the world and the world itself are but two aspects of one reality is the important question that divides Milbank's metaphysics from nihilism. For Milbank the Trinity is qualitatively different than creation and indeed ontologically self-sufficient. One need not refer to creation in order to explain the Trinity. On the other hand, Gilles Deleuze, for example, seems to collapse Being and finite reality into one another, explaining one in terms of the other. Milbank interprets Deleuze in the same way as Alain Badiou[233], saying "every differential happening is also the eternal return of the same, the repetition of a self-identical existence, while difference is not fundamentally a matter of irreducible relation, but rather of the 'original' and continuous variation of a primordial unity." [234]The irony here is that Deleuze, by extolling difference as simply the repetition of the same, ends up reducing diversity to unity. There is a sort of dualism within a monism here, where Being is explained

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[233] "Contrary even to the apparent indications of his work that play on the opposition multiple/multiplicities… it is the occurrence of the One-renamed by Deleuze the One-AlI-that forms the supreme destination of thought and to which thought is accordingly consecrated…. We can therefore first state that one must carefully identify a metaphysics of the One in the work of Deleuze. Alain Badiou. *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being.* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.) 11

[234] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 306

in terms of beings, yet beings are explained in terms of Being.[235] One wonders

whether the philosophy of difference actually denigrates difference rather than

upholding it.

Just to balance Milbank's characterization of Deleuze, some quotes from

Deleuze are instructive. In *Difference and Repetition,* Deleuze stated, "A single and

same voice for the whole thousand-voiced multiple, a single and same Ocean for all

the drops, a single clamour of Being for all beings."[236] In *The Logic of Sense,* Deleuze

wrote, "in short, the univocity of Being has three determinations: one single event

for all events; one and the same *aliquid* for that which happens and that which is

said; and one and the same Being for the impossible, the possible, and the real."[237]

Milbank's criticism that difference is somewhat reduced to unity seems justified

based upon Deleuze's explicit statements. Thus, a charge of monism becomes

possible, which is a fairly damning charge for a philosophy of *difference.*

Conor Cunningham very helpfully uses the analogy of the Gestalt effect of

aspect perception to illuminate precisely the problem in nihilist philosophy when it

reduces difference to unity. The example here refers to Spinoza's dualism of God and

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[235] On the prevalence of this 'dualism within a monism' Cunningham writes, "Spinoza has Substance reside outside the aspectual 'Text' of God or Nature, and it is this Substance which forces God to appear only in Nature, and Nature to appear only in God. Kant constructs the 'Text' of the phenomenal only by the no-thingness of the noumenal which lies beyond it. Hegel has the 'Text' of the finite by placing the infinite 'outside' it, to the degree that every finite manifestation is both enabled and negated by this infinitude. Husserl generates the 'Text' of the phenomenal only by bracketing (epoché) the question of existence; Heidegger has the 'Text' of Being only by invoking das Nicht; Deleuze has the 'Text' of sense only by having a non-sense outside it; both Sartre and Lacan have existence only within the lack of being. Levinas can only exist in a manner which is otherwise than being, which means that he too must have something constitutive outside the 'Text' of being; Badiou has the 'Text' of what he calls the event, by way of the void which resides outside it. Consequently, we can understand why Badiou asserts that man is 'sustained by non-being (non-étant) '" Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*: *Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology*, xvi-xvii
[236] Gilles Deleuze. *Difference and Repetition*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994.) 304
[237] Gilles Deleuze. *The Logic of Sense.* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1990.) 180

Nature, which are really the same thing, but it can be applied to Deleuze (and

Derrida). He writes,

> Take the example of Jastrow's duck- rabbit. One either sees the duck or the
> rabbit – never both at the same time. The mind oscillates between the two.
> But what must be remembered is that the appearance of two (God or Nature,
> duck or rabbit) disguises the one picture upon which they are made manifest.
> In this way there is only ever one, but this one picture is able to provide the
> appearance of two despite their actual alternating absences: nothing as
> something; the completely absent rabbit as duck, which is yet equally the
> completely absent duck as rabbit.[238]

Applying Deleuze's aquatic metaphor quoted above, the Ocean is really just the

drops, while the drops are really just the Ocean. The endless variations and

differences of beings are really just the same unity being said over and over again. A

true difference between Being and beings is not a part of Deleuze's philosophy.

Milbank is not as clear as one would like as to why Christianity gives a better

account of the ontological difference than nihilism, but he does begin in the correct

place: the Christian doctrine of creation upholds a real distinction between God and

the World. The Neo-platonic notion of causality can be helpful here. Pickstock

explains this when she writes, "A higher total cause which by an "in-flowing" gives

rise to an equally total cause at a lower level... For the older view of "influence",

which followed the metaphorical contour of the term itself, a lower cause could

retain its full integrity and yet be the "gift" of a higher cause with which it was in no

sense properly commensurate."[239] Creation is a sort of emanation from God that has

its own freedom, which is ontologically determined entirely by its cause, God. This

integrity of creation requires an ontological distance from God, even though God is

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[238] Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology,* xiv
[239] Pickstock, Catherine. 2005. "Duns Scotus: His Historical and Contemporary Significance*." Modern Theology* 21, no. 4: 543-574. 551

the source. Love is an important concept for understanding this difference because

love requires distance, such that a true distinction between God and creation is

required for the sharing of love. Without this distinction God becomes the

puppeteer and creation the puppet. Thus, a level of freedom and difference is

required for love. And as Christian theology always affirmed that creation is an

outpouring of the love of God, then the difference of creation makes sense.[240] Of

course, the actual structural difference between God and creation and how this all

maps out logically is quite vague, but perhaps it must be at least somewhat so in

order to preserve God's transcendence of creation.

As such it has been seen that Christianity offers an alternative perspective

upon the ontological difference that may in fact offer a better explanation of

difference than nihilism.

Difference between Actuality and Possibility

This section deals with a subtle question about possibility and actuality that

may seem quite esoteric and irrelevant to the topic at hand. But this is far from the

case. What will be explored immediately below is the question of whether it is

possible for violence to be more primary than peace within creation. This inevitably

raises the related question of what kinds of things are possible within creation. Is

anything that is not a logical contradiction possible? Or is possibility restricted in

some way, such that only certain types of things are possible while others are

impossible? The answers to these questions had been given in the Middle Ages, and

elaborating on these answers will go a long way in showing how theological they

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[240] Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology,* 213-15

are. Another way of framing the problem, is to ask when beings are opened up into time (created), does this process (for lack of a better word) share the transcendental attributes of God (Being, Good, Beautiful, True)? And further, can something that in essence does not share in these modalities "possibly" come to be? As mentioned above, this raises the question of what exactly the word "possibility" means. For modern thought, as will be shown below, following Duns Scotus and Ockham's formulation, to be possible is to be logically possible. In other words, something is possible if it does not involve a logical contradiction. This is very different from Aquinas' view on this matter. For Aquinas, things or events are only possible if they are capable of imitating God. This is because God is the formal cause of creation. Another way of stating this is that Aquinas privileges act over potency, while later thinkers privileged possibility (potentiality) over actuality.

For Aquinas, God creates the world through his ideas.[241] These divine ideas are not merely in God's mind, to speak anthropomorphically, but are present within creation as well. So to be is to participate in the divine ideas. To put it in Milbank's words, creation is "participatorily enfolded within the divine expressive *logos.*"[242] So for Aquinas when a person knows an object, he or she receives the form of that object impressed upon their mind. But if the object itself participates in the divine ideas, then knowing the object is also a participation in the divine ideas. This is considered "illumination" because God is the light that illumines all things. Light is linked to form, because it is the form of things that is associated with the quality of

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[241] Thomas Aquinas. *The Summa Theologica.* Second and Revised Edition, 1920 Literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province Online Edition Copyright © 2008 by Kevin Knight. 1.14.1-2

[242] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason.* 2nd ed., 15

'beauty.' And of course, God is the source and exemplar of all beauty; therefore, to be is to participate in God's beauty, to share in the divine light.[243] Linking this back to the divine ideas, God is the formal cause of creation because God's ideas are the 'blueprint' or 'design' from which creation is made. But to see Milbank's overall point about the temporalizing process, one must take care not to think of creation as a single divine act occurring in the past. It is an atemporal event in which creatures participate as co-creators at a lower ontological level (Milbank is technically following Eriugena here rather than Aquinas).[244] Therefore, the unfolding of creation, both impersonal and personal beings, is bound to the divine ideas. This means that to be is to imitate and share in God's *logos*.

The above-mentioned difference in the definition of "possibility" arises during the Middle Ages, within the debates concerning the problem of universals, and the relation between the divine intellect and will. It is helpful to contrast Aquinas with Avicenna and Duns Scotus (who prepared the way for Ockham).[245] For Aquinas, universals such as the idea "man" only exist in the mind of God and in each individual who happens to be human. There is no "subsistent" idea that exists somehow aside from the individual and God's mind. But Avicenna, the 11th century Muslim philosopher, argues for the existence of "proper essences," which are "ideas/essences" that somehow hover between possibility and actuality. They are not necessarily in God's mind or in individual things, but they have a sort of being in

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[243] Aquinas is here very obviously influenced by his reading of John 1 in the New Testament.
[244] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason.* 2nd ed., 432
cf. On the Power of God, Q 3, A 15, ad. 1, ad. 2. Aquinas, *et al*, *An Aquinas Reader*, 129
[245] Between Plato and Descartes: The Medieval Transformation in the Ontological Status of the Ideas*.,* in James R. Mensch, *After Modernity Husserlian Reflections on a Philosophical Tradition.* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996.) Chapter 1. III

their own right. God uses these proper essences to create, but one must notice that they are external to God. For Aquinas, the divine ideas, which are internal to God, are used to create. Duns Scotus disliked the implications of God depending on ideas external to himself, so he maintained that these ideas were actually nothing (having no being in themselves), but he did in general accept Avicenna's "proper essences."[246] William of Ockham wrote, "if it is possible it is possible before it is produced in intelligible being."[247] Conor Cunningham comments saying, "The possible, in being potentially intelligible (*esse intelligible*), is independent of God and does not receive this potential from God."[248] Thus, potentiality is something removed from God's actuality. Combining this with a doctrine of creation, then one sees that everything not involving a logical contradiction is fair game for creation. One example that F. C. Copleston focuses on is that "God can produce every possible effect, even without a secondary cause; He could, for instance, produce in the human being an act of hatred of Himself, and if He were to do so He would not sin."[249] This highlights, as was shown in chapter one, that the voluntarist God was not bound by God's own Goodness, Beauty, or Truth. Rather God's infinite power meant that God could do anything not contradictory. Now if God's existence comes into question, then a secular doctrine of creation would tend in the direction of Ockham's philosophy;[250] if there is no God who is pure act (*purus actus*) to imitate, then

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[246] Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology,* 12
[247] *Ord. I, d. 43, q. 2.* Quoted in *Ibid*., 23
[248] *Ibid.*
[249] Frederick C. Copleston. *A History of Philosophy. Vol. 3. Late Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy* (London: Burns, Oates, & Washbourne. 1951.) 95
[250] James Mensch shows that this changed understanding of possibility is at the foundation of modern philosophy, notably in Rene Descartes' philosophy. Mensch, *After Modernity Husserlian Reflections on a Philosophical Tradition*, Chapter 1. I.

possibility depends on a bare logical possibility.[251]

The practical result of the above discussion is that in Aquinas' thought, only that which participated in the divine ideas is possible. A truly violent being, whose violence is ontologically primary, is impossible because such a thing would have to share in God's existence but not in God's goodness, which is impossible because God's being and goodness cannot be separated. But if anything that is not logically contradictory is possible, then creation is not limited to God's character. The implication is that true violence and evil become possible. In other words, for Aquinas the unfolding of creation in time is bound to the modalities of the True, Good, and Beauty. Anything false, evil, or ugly (in a metaphysical sense) must be a parasite or privation that mars an underlying truth, good, or beauty. Thus, for Aquinas, the peace and harmony of the process of creation is fundamental, with any violence or evil being a fall away from this primordial goodness.[252] Contrasted with this is the nihilist insistence that violence and evil could actually be ontologically primary. This results from Ockham's view that things or events that are purely evil with no possibility of being redeemed are technically admitted.

Whether creation can be inherently violent is a very pertinent question for it provides the background of the following section in which it will be shown that Gilles Deleuze, for example, argues that the primary relation between individual things is always violent. This depends upon an understanding of possibility along the lines of Ockham. Because this issue has been sorted out first, it is easier to see how Aquinas' doctrine of creation and the divine ideas can be used as an alternative

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[251] *Ibid.*, Chapter 2. IV
[252] *Compendium of Theology*, ch. 141. In Aquinas, *et al*, *An Aquinas Reader*, 162

to Deleuze.

Ontic Difference

The second meaning of difference is ontic difference, which is the difference between individual objects. It is not that nihilism denies ontic difference; rather it argues that ontic difference is primarily violent. The world is essentially a collection of individual things competing with one another. This can be expressed economically/ethically in terms of humans being primarily violent towards one another, or it can be put in metaphysical terms in which the universe is primarily made of individual units that are ultimately indifferent to one another and interact without any sort of harmony.

Another question related to the two ways of looking at difference, is whether the source of being can be contained or embodied within the finite order. In other words, if the source of being was the exemplar of goodness, is it possible for this goodness to be diffused throughout the finite world such that finite beings could imitate and participate in this primordial goodness? Much of the debate between Christianity and nihilism seems to be bound up in the answer to this question. Aquinas very clearly argues that creation participates in God's nature, such that true goodness, beauty, truth, value, etc., appear within creation.[253] This also gives us a means of understanding the character of the source of being, although the disclosure of God's character is only fully explicated in Christ's incarnation.

But nihilism can be viewed as offering two interrelated perspective upon the above question. Either the finite world cannot embody the supreme values of the

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[253] *Debated Questions* II, q. 2, a. 3(1). In, Aquinas, *et al*, *An Aquinas Reader,* 73

source of being, thus leading to a world of chaos and violence. Or the finite world

does in fact participate in its source, but the source of being is pictured itself as a

primordial event of chaos and violence. At times it is difficult to separate these from

one another and to textually determine which of these the nihilists prefer, though

the present author leans towards the latter. But either way, Aquinas' position on this

matter is clearly rejected and replaced with a philosophy of violent difference,

rather than peaceful difference.

The French Philosopher Gilles Delueze states very clearly that ontic

difference is to be understood violently. In a fairly lengthy and obscure passage, he

wrote:

> There are certainly many dangers in invoking pure differences which have
> become independent of the negative and liberated from the identical. The
> greatest danger is that of lapsing into the representations of a beautiful soul:
> there are only reconcilable and federative differences, far removed from
> bloody struggles. The beautiful soul says: **we are different, but not
> opposed**... The *notion of a problem,* which we see linked to that of difference,
> also seems to nurture the sentiments of the beautiful soul: only problems and
> questions matter.... Nevertheless, we believe that when these problems attain
> their proper degree of *positivity,* and when difference becomes the object of a
> corresponding *affirmation,* they release a power of aggression and selection
> which destroys the beautiful soul by depriving it of its very identity and
> breaking its good will. The problematic and the differential determine
> struggles or destructions in relation to which those of the negative are only
> appearances, and the wishes of the beautiful soul are so many mystifications
> trapped in appearances. The simulacrum is not just a copy, but that which
> overturns all copies by *also* overturning the models: every thought becomes
> an aggression.[254]

David Bentley Hart points out the irony here with utter clarity. He writes, "This

means that to choose wisely is to embrace every freedom but one. Every thought is

allowed except the thought that thought may be peaceful, and that only then does it

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[254] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* xx. Boldface added.

think being truly."[255] This simply repeats Nietzsche's criticism of Christianity as

Ressentiment,[256] in which it is simply the denial and resentment of the fundamental

reality of power, which it is powerless to overcome. Only brief periods of peace can

appear as the absence of war, but even these are either ruses of power or are

eventually swallowed up by the tide of pure affirmative difference.

Contrasted with this is the Christian notion that charity/love is the primary

way of understanding the relations between God and creation and between

creatures. Charity is loving someone by wanting their good.[257] For Aquinas,

creatures are grounded in Trinitarian love.[258] Charity is a participation in the Holy

Spirit. [259]Commenting on its universal significance, Aquinas stated that "no virtue

has such a strong tendency toward its act as charity does, nor does any virtue

operate with as great pleasure."[260]Upon this foundation Milbank argues that it is

possible to think of a social theory in which all things (including God) are

analogically related. Milbank writes, "every temporal ontological arrangement

would have to be grasped in aesthetic terms: x and y may be different, yet they

belong together in their difference in a specific 'exemplary' ordering, and this

'belonging together' means a certain sort of convergence, a certain commonality."[261]

The bond that holds all things together in charity is their participation in God,

specifically in the Holy Spirit, who as the bond of love between the Father and the

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[255] David Bentley Hart. *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth.* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003) 64
[256] Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche and J. M. Kennedy. *The Genealogy of Morals; A Polemic.* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1924). §§ 10–11
[257] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-III. 23.1
[258] *Ibid.,* I.37.2
[259] *Ibid.,* II-III. 23.3 Aquinas, *et al, An Aquinas Reader,* 407
[260] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-III. 23.2
[261] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason.* 2nd ed., 307

Son,[262] is also (but not reducible to) the bond of love between creatures. This

Christian understanding of the social nature of creatures is in many ways exactly

opposite to Deleuze's description. But, one must admit that it is all too obvious that

the nihilistic reading of creation as violent is often true. The dividing question then

is whether peace or violence is primary. As such, Christianity and nihilism give very

different perspectives upon understanding reality in its relational aspect. But again,

the question is the same and the answers are on the same level. One does not ask a

question that is more primordial than the other. The relation between Christianity

and nihilism is again that of two differing narratives or metaphysics that simply

describe the world in different terms. Therefore, Christianity can be seen as an

alternative to nihilism.

Ontic Violence and Language

Derrida argues that our language never describes beings properly, for our

language is always constructed ways of understanding the world, in which these

constructions do not really exist. Thus, one can ask the question of whether

language distorts the world around us and does violence to those we encounter.

Derrida argues that this does in fact occur. He wrote,

> To name, to give names that it will on occasion be forbidden to pronounce,
> such is the originary violence of language which consists in inscribing within
> a difference, in classifying, in suspending the vocative absolute. To think the
> unique within the system, to inscribe it there, such is the gesture of arche-
> writing: arche-violence, loss of the proper, of absolute proximity, of self-
> presence, in truth the loss of what has never taken place, of a self-presence
> which has never been given but only dreamed of and always already split,
> repeated, incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance.[263]

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262 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica,* I.37.1
263 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 112

Essentially, Derrida is saying that the meaning of words is always mediated by our experience, which includes our language, history, desires, etc. The meaning of a word is never merely present to us in an unmediated fashion. This is relevant to the question of ontic violence because it would seem that if all knowledge and experience of otherness is mediated, then a great possibility for misinterpreting the other arises. For one's experience that mediates knowledge of the other can always potentially reduce the other to our experience. The other's novelty can be betrayed and distorted into something familiar, thus doing violence to this other. In other words, 'being' exceeds language, for what is can never be adequately put into language without distortion. The question arises of whether this affects a Christian account of peaceable relations amongst peoples.

Milbank does not deal with this question as satisfactorily as one could hope. Thus, the work of his colleague Conor Cunningham will be invoked in showing a Christian alternative. For Cunningham, 'being' may indeed exceed language, but this could simply point to the fact that all beings are created infinities, reflecting God's archetypal infinity. As Conor Cunningham writes, "beauty introduces a temporal infinity – if not eternity – into the mundane… The temporal infinity of the corporeal, introduced by beauty, allows us to know being but prevents us from comprehending it."[264]

First, Cunningham compares created objects to God, who as pure plenitude

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[264] Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology*, 195

cannot be comprehended.[265] He writes, "each being is a plenitude, for it is an imitable example of the divine essence."[266] We can know beings, just as we can know God, but we cannot comprehend (in the etymological sense of to catch ahold of, or grasp) God or being. He continues, "Therefore the nature of *this* being – as this being – resists every reductive analysis; the very *time* of its being implicates eternity."[267] But this resistance or space between language and being is not one of distortion where nothing true can be said. Rather, it is the resistance of love. Cunningham writes, "it is the lover, the one who is the most intimate, who knows that the one he or she loves escapes every description."[268] To put this simply, it is obvious to anyone who truly loves someone that a mere list or intellectual understanding of their good qualities is not on the same level as enjoying the loving relationship with them. Cunningham goes as far as to say that knowledge is inversely proportional to our comprehension of something. This is because the more we know something the more we know it transcends every description.[269] And the more we know something by its descriptions alone (comprehension), the more we are missing the real experience of the thing in question.

This has immense implications for epistemology, as true knowledge that resists reducing the object of knowledge must be mediated through an *eros* which

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[265] As Hans Urs von Balthasar summarizes, "Being (esse), with which [Aquinas] is concerned and to which he attributes the modalities of the One, the True, the Good and the Beautiful, is the unlimited abundance of reality which is beyond all comprehension, as it, in its emergence from God, attains subsistence and self-possession within the finite entities." Quoted in, Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology*, 220-221
[266] *Ibid.*, 222
[267] *Ibid.*
[268] *Ibid.*
cf. Plato wrote in the *Phaedrus*, "'[B]y this madness he is called a lover . . . Then they are beside themselves, and their experience is beyond their comprehension because they cannot fully grasp what it is that they are seeing.'" Quoted in *Ibid.*
[269] *Ibid.*, 194

draws the knower to the known yet gives only a veiled glimpse of the known. Or as Cunningham writes, "only love can know – because only love can know difference – and difference can only be known if it is known by a lover. This, in some sense, means that knowledge has its own veil, but one that arises from the plenitude of the object.[270] A lack of love in which one ignores the transcendent character of each being results in the betrayal that Derrida very rightly points out. But Cunningham's analysis questions Derrida's attempt to make this betrayal ontologically primary.

Summary

Nihilism is no doubt an interesting philosophy. But as was shown above, it narrates a story about reality that is different from that of Christianity. There are certainly elements common to both, for violence is part of the world, although Christianity would attribute this to a secondary falling away from a primary harmony. But nihilism seems to organize its understanding of the world around the category of 'violence.' As such, it is complicit with the modern notion of finding the structural categories that explain all of experience. Thus, nihilism is in continuity with Kantian transcendentalism, which was explored in chapter two.

Milbank's theo-philosophical question is whether nihilism really offers a better or more fundamental way of understanding the world that Christianity can learn from. Milbank doubts this because nihilism is rooted in a fundamentally different metaphysics. This of course is not to say that Christianity can never learn from nihilism's questions or engage nihilism, rather that Christianity should not seek to learn something more fundamental than its own ontology from nihilism.

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[270] *Ibid.*

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One's Christian narrative would be strengthened by listening to questions and objections from outside its own narrative, but this is the only extent to which Christianity can engage it.

Nihilism is in essential continuity with modern secularism, for it denies substantive knowledge of the divine, for the same Kantian reasons disclosed in chapter two, and because it denies the ontological participation of the finite world in a transcendent source and exemplar of goodness, truth, beauty, etc. Therefore, structurally, modern and postmodern secular social theory, while having different emphases, are two variations on the same theme: a world without analogy of being, analogical language, and neo-Platonic participation. As such, Milbank seems correct in asserting that Christianity is bound up in the acceptance of just what secular social theory denies; therefore, it must refuse to let secularism understand itself as a neutral discourse that simply explains the way the world is. So far, Aquinas has been used as a counterexample, showing that Christianity can decode the world in fundamentally different categories. While it has already been shown that Christianity provides alternatives to specific philosophical elements of secularism, more needs to be said regarding the general question of how Christianity can set itself up as a rival discourse to secularism. The conclusion of this thesis will explore Milbank's project more explicitly, while seeking to further the conversation by listening to the concerns of his critics. This will bring the thesis to the point where a final verdict on Milbank's project in *Theology and Social Theory* will be offered.

CONCLUSION

The overall argument that Milbank makes in *Theology and Social Theory* is that secularism is founded upon a completely different philosophy than is Christianity. As such, Christianity has its own deep resources for understanding the world in its own way, which are no less respectable than those of secularism. While the main facets of this argument have been explored in the previous chapters, some questions and concerns remain. The goal of this conclusion is to tie up these loose ends, listen to, and when necessary, critique Milbank's critics, and to give a final verdict on the value of Milbank's project in *Theology and Social Theory.*

John Milbank and Postmodernity

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, there is a great tension within Milbank's thought due to the fact that Milbank hijacks postmodern philosophy to critique modernity, yet he then denies the validity of postmodernity. Gavin Hyman of the University of Lancaster argues that Milbank is not postmodern enough because he tries to resurrect traditional Christian orthodoxy and passes it off as a variety of postmodernism. Now Hyman does admit that Milbank's metaphysics of participation does in fact overcome many modern dualisms (faith/reason, sacred/profane, etc.). But he writes, "although the doctrine of participation may overcome (or at least minimize) the dualism within the Christian story as presented by Milbank, the dualism that results from Milbank's absolute conception of the theological metanarrative remains; for now theology and philosophy are set *over*

and against each other."[271] The contrast here is that Milbank may correct the inner

dualisms of Christianity, but new outer dualisms between Christianity and other

discourses are created. Thus, Christian theology over against secular philosophy is a

new dualism, even if the faith/reason (theology/philosophy) dualism was overcome

within the inner logic of Christianity itself.

What seems to be at stake here is the way in which Milbank sets up

Christianity as a fairly stable entity amidst the flux of the world by anchoring it upon

transcendence that it participates in. But if postmodernity is essentially defined by

showing that all of our concepts are constructs that do violence to reality, *à la*

Derrida, then Milbank's project must be profoundly un-postmodern because it does

bring stable categories to the world. Hyman prefers a postmodern theology in which

every categorical statement about reality is false, yet necessarily spoken. Setting up

worldviews is necessary yet always inherently unstable.[272] This is because he denies

that a tradition of human knowing can participate in transcendence, embodying and

revealing it within the finite world.

This being said, Milbank's apophaticism could be construed as consistent

with postmodernism, for it destabilizes theological language. And the arguments

borrowed from Conor Cunningham regarding people and objects exceeding our

language and knowledge about them also has a postmodern flavor to it. In an

interview with Rupert Shortt, religion editor of the Times Literary Supplement,

Milbank makes his debt to postmodernity quite clear:

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[271] Gavin Hyman. *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?*
(Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). 73
[272] *Ibid,.* 139

> Part of our case involves the claim that theology is on the side of indeterminacy, and of a certain authentic and inescapable vagueness, because if we live in a created universe which only reflects in multiple finite ways an infinite plenitude of meaning, then there is a sense in which everything is always somewhat partial and uncertain, veiled, fragmentary and never foreclosed.[273]

But the point here is that even if knowledge is always partial, Milbank does draw up crucial distinctions that seem to be too stable for a convinced postmodernist. Hyman seems to be more authentically postmodern because he refuses any sort of mediation or participation. No discourse is capable of coming closer to the truth than any other because Truth [sic] cannot be embodied in finite reality.

Thus, Milbank is postmodern in some ways, but because he affirms participation, the analogy of being and analogical language, he is able to erect hierarchies and categories for understanding reality that do not betray reality. This is essentially postmodernism plus participation. Does this then make Milbank complicit with modernism due to his attempt to set up formal structures of experience? Yes and no. Yes, he believes in ultimate truth, even if our knowledge of it is always somewhat partial. No, because Milbank believes that the truth of Christianity is a matter of rhetoric and not dialectic.

Rhetoric and Dialectic

What is at issue here is whether Milbank's Christianity is founded upon another discipline that gives it legitimacy. For Milbank, Christianity is rhetoric because it denies that its narrative can be disclosed by a more fundamental rational discourse. Christianity does not appeal to Reason to justify its own claims because

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[273] "Radical Orthodoxy: A Conversation" In: Simon Oliver, and John Milbank. *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader.* (London: Routledge, 2009.) 32

there is no neutral realm of reason that can adjudicate between worldviews. One

does not simply arrive at the truths of Christianity through the process of working

out philosophical contradictions and paradoxes. Precisely what Milbank is getting at

will become clear by comparing his account of rhetoric with Alasdair MacIntyre's

conception of dialectic.

Scottish Philosopher and Thomist Alasdair MacIntyre gives a very clear

understanding of Socratic dialectic. His understanding of dialectic will be used as a

contrast with Milbank's proposal. MacIntyre writes concerning Socrates:

> The first step toward truth had to be the use of *elenchus* [refutation] to
> exhibit the unreliability of our pre-existing beliefs. For by involving his
> interlocutors in inconsistency concerning the nature of courage, or piety, or
> justice, or whatever, Socrates showed them not only that not everything they
> believed on that subject could be true, but also that they had no resource for
> deciding which parts of what they believed were false and which, if any,
> true.[274]

This of course leads one to the question of how exactly one proceeds to demonstrate

any truth about anything, for our reasoning is always open to at least some doubt.

The Socratic answer is to choose a particular thesis, perhaps arbitrarily, and then

attempt to find problems with it. MacIntyre writes, "that thesis which most

successfully withstands all attempts to refute it... is that which claims our rational

allegiance."[275] Milbank comments on this when he writes, "Thus, perfectly

contingent starting points progressively but negatively struggle free of the historical

chrysalis and float upwards to universality."[276] The question of course is whether

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[274] Alasdair C. MacIntyre. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988.) 71
[275] *Ibid.*
[276] John Milbank. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.) 329

Christianity is to be thought of as the result of a dialectical process, in which it is simply the worldview that best stands up to scrutiny, or is it arrived at by another method?

If Milbank thought Christianity could be argued to dialectically, then the accusation that he abandons postmodernity, fleeing back into modernity, might have some legitimacy. But Milbank denies this and instead argues that Christianity is a matter of persuasion and faith, which is rhetorically instilled.[277] Christianity is a revealed religion in which its founder not only taught new things, but he began a new community that embodied these things, namely "its promotion of charity, forgiveness, patience, etc."[278] Therefore, Milbank still avoids accusations of foundationalism.

Faith and Reason

But if Milbank convincingly avoids foundationalism, is his theo-philosophical project foundationless? One of the most common critiques of Milbank's theological project is that he reduces theology to a sort of Barthian fideism. Douglas Hedley of Cambridge University writes, "This fideism leaves theology itself in an alarmingly precarious state: attacking rationality may fend off the cultured despisers of religion, but it also removes one of the important sources of religious belief, reason as the 'candle of the Lord.'"[279] This viewpoint misunderstands Milbank for a few reasons. First, Milbank does not eschew 'reason' or 'rationality;' rather he shows that reason is always bound within a tradition. His argument, whether convincing or

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[277] *Ibid.*

[278] *Ibid.*, 332

[279] Douglas Hedley. 2000. "Should Divinity Overcome Metaphysics? Reflections on John Milbank's Theology Beyond Secular Reason and Confessions of a Cambridge Platonist". *The Journal of Religion*. 80, no. 2: 271-298. 272

not, includes the assertion that the Christian tradition has the best story about reason because reason goes 'all the way down,' while for nihilism reason is grounded in unreason (or sense in nonsense). Second, it is qualitatively different from Karl Barth's theology because Barth tended to recognize the validity of secular sciences *tout court*, while Milbank argues emphatically that they do not have independent validity. Because all of creation participates in God, there is no discourse about creation that escapes theological critique.[280] Now this does not mean that all of secular science is somehow incorrect. Milbank takes a traditional approach to creation in which, although creation participates in God, it has its own created integrity. Creation unfolds according to its own inner logic, which is none other than God's *logos*. Milbank holds to the ontological difference between God and creation, such that God causes creation, but this causation sets up a finite level of causation that functions within yet not completely determined in detail by the divine causation.[281] So creation has its own freedom to unfold in different ways, but always according to its inner logic. To this extent, any discourse on creation can understand much about the world truly.[282] Indeed there is even much freedom within these discourses for, because creation unfolds according to its own inner logic, one does not need to constantly appeal to external or verbal divine revelation to see what God's 'version' of the truth is; creation displays it.

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[280] John Milbank. Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward. *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology.* (London: Routledge, 1999) 3

[281] *Ibid.*, 4

[282] Simon Oliver interestingly states, "theology says something about everything, while other discourses often seek to say everything about something."
Simon Oliver and John Milbank. *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader.* (London: Routledge, 2009.) 36

While incidental to this thesis, Creationism and Intelligent Design are good illustrations of how theology should not interact with secular science and will help highlight why Milbank's approach is different. Creationism and Intelligent Design both presuppose a modern picture of God in which God is a being among others who interacts with the world on the same level of causality as that of creation. By observing nature, one could empirically detect places where direct divine intervention was necessary for some process to occur. But Milbank's Neo-Platonism is completely different from this. For God is not on the same level as creation, and God is never absent from the world such that 'divine intervention' is a somewhat misguided term. For Milbank, God is always present, and creation unfolds itself according to God as both its formal and final cause. Thus, science is free to study the world empirically and form theories explaining its various features.[283] The idea of theology providing an account of empirical details, such as God did *x* or *y*, which contradicts the findings of science, is something of a category mistake. To say that God designed something in the sense of being the formal cause is not only good theology, but also arguably a much better foundation for modern science than nihilism.[284] But to say that God is the efficient or moving cause of creation is an anthropomorphic modern invention.

Another way of putting this is that Milbank challenges the liberal fact/value distinction, wherein science studies facts and religion studies values. Milbank deconstructs this dualism by arguing that fact and value are co-equal. By divorcing

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[283] Of course scientific realism has been called into question by much of postmodern theory, but it does not affect this current point.

[284] Francis J. Beckwith. "How to be an Anti-Intelligent Design Advocate." *U. St. Thomas JL & Pub*. Pol'y 4 (2009): 35.

value from fact, one ultimately ends up in a nihilistic sphere, for values are inevitably pushed into some mystical non-rational sphere that ultimately has nothing to say to the world. Or as it is sometimes stated, when science reduces the world to mere numbers (à la Descartes),[285] it presupposes nihilism by denying "values." But what theology has to offer is its reminder that values are part of the world around us and fundamental to our experience. In a sense, the scientific worldview is inherently nihilistic. As Russian Orthodox theologian and philosopher Sergei Bulgakov wrote, "Science deliberately commits a murder of the world and of nature, it studies nature's corpse."[286] While this may sound dramatic, it is quite lucid when understood methodologically rather than ontologically. Conor Cunningham comments, "science becomes dangerous when the irreality (that is, abstractness) of its methods is mistaken for reality."[287] Secular science can have its own discourse upon the world that studies the facts, but theology's main contribution is to make sure that the ontology behind these sciences is not set in stone and not reductionist. In many cases, this involves not disputing the empirical facts, but insisting that value is co-equal with facts.

To summarize, Milbank is not Barthian because theology critiques every discipline. But this is not from the perspective of a sort of naïve theology (à la biblical literalism) that tries to do science a priori based on special revelation, but from a robust metaphysical tradition that knows the place of both ontology and

[285] James R. Mensch. *Knowing and Being: A Postmodern Reversal*. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996.) 11-15

[286] Cunningham, Conor. *Darwin's Pious Idea: Why the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get It Wrong.* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2010.) 301

[287] *Ibid*., 301-302

empirical modes of study, critiquing the philosophical problems of secular science rather than the data. This means that theology does not eschew rationality in any meaningful sense whatsoever. Theology is open to an internal critique by any Christian or non-Christian knowledgeable enough to do so, but external arguments from another tradition against Christianity are merely the narration of another story, not a true critique.[288] But one must ask the slightly apologetical question of which tradition gives the most satisfying account of reason. Milbank certainly believes Christianity to be the discourse of true reason for reason goes "all the way down" (to God's *Logos*).[289] But this is not a dispute than can be adjudicated by an un-traditioned neutral reason.

Common Ground

Does this mean there is no common ground between Christians and those of other traditions? Douglas Hedley argues that the central mistake of Milbank's theology is that it "rests on the fallacious inference from what his teacher Nicholas Lash calls 'the myth of neutral space' to the Milbankian denial of any common ground between believer and nonbeliever."[290] Two different approaches can be given to answering this charge. First, *eros* and its foundational role in human life will provide a way of answering this problem. Second, a closer examination of the relation between meaning and truth with respect to worldviews will be explored.

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[288] "Dealing with suspicion now becomes a matter of complex narrative negotiations (retelling the ecclesial story so as to accept some external criticisms, now made into self-criticisms, and to rebut others) rather than of concessions made at one level to a source of critique which remains external to theology, but made to allow us better to man the impregnable spiritual citadel of 'religious meaning', poised precariously upon the granite outcrop of 'the secular'."
Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 269
[289] *Ibid.*, xvi
[290] Hedley, "Should Divinity Overcome Metaphysics? Reflections on John Milbank's Theology Beyond Secular Reason and Confessions of a Cambridge Platonist," 275-276

Milbank does seem to deny common understanding between different

traditions due to the fact that meaning is always situated by large contexts of

experience and an overarching worldview. So far Hedley seems correct. But does

this in fact remove any common ground between believers and non-believers?[291]

No, because the Christian life, while always somewhat reflective, is not primarily an

intellectual endeavor. A proper account of the fundamentally affective and erotic

character of human nature is able to somewhat bypass this radical postmodern lack

of common ground because according to the Christian tradition all of creation is

teleologically ordered to its source. There is a desire in the human being that can

only be fulfilled by God.[292] And God ignites this desire, such that all of creation has

some inkling of God; finite beauty, truth and goodness give an intrinsic knowledge of

the Trinity, no matter how faint this knowledge is. This is not rational

comprehension of abstract proposition, rather the knowledge of a lover. Thus, since

all of creation desires God in this way, a sort of common ground between believers

and non-believers opens to view; the common desire of God acts as a sort of bond

that exceeds the limitations of conversing with those of a completely different

mythos.

To approach it from another direction, in a sense there is an ambiguity in the

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[291] In a sense the term 'common ground' is unfortunate, for it evokes a picture of a spatial realm that stands outside of the cultural/linguistic orderings of human traditions of understanding. If there were such a common ground it would arguably be a realm of which humans could have no knowledge, due to its remoteness from our traditions.

[292] For example, Pseudo-Dionysius wrote, "But the 'beautiful' which is beyond individual being is called 'beauty' because of that beauty bestowed by it on all things, each in accordance with what it is. It is given this name because it is the cause of the harmony and splendor in everything, because like a light it flashed onto everything the beauty-causing impartations of its own well-spring ray. Beauty 'bids' all things to itself (whence it is called 'beauty') and gathers everything unto itself." Pseudo-Dionysius, Colm Luibhéid, and Paul Rorem. *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works.* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1987.) 76

term common ground, for Milbank does argue that different narratives are incommensurable, that is, unable to be judged by a common standard. But what specifically is incommensurable between competing worldviews? Many criticize postmodern theory for arguing that meaning is incommensurable,[293] which would entail that the meaning of any given datum is relative to the worldview in question; there is no overlap of meaning. The problem of common ground only arises if one assumes that people can only inhabit one tradition at a time, or that the powers of the human imagination are such that one cannot truly learn to think according to another tradition to some degree. This may be true at a surface level, but the fact that people do in fact convert between differing traditions suggests that people can alter their own understanding in such a way that they can grasp a given issue from more than one tradition at a time in a sort of double vision.[294] Given that this is the case, Milbank argues that postmodern theory argues for the priority of meaning over truth. This is because truth is incommensurable—bound to different traditioned meanings and criteria of justification. But if one is diligent in understanding a different tradition at the levels of both theory and praxis, one can come to an understanding of how the differing traditions understand a given datum, but one has no criteria for deciding between these traditioned understandings. In other words, one can learn the tradition of the other but no objective criteria that could assist in deciding which one is ultimately true can be had. The practical upshot

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[293] See Milbank's discussion of Donald Davidson and Hilary Putnam in relation to this point. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 341-345

[294] While this may begin as a process of translation from one tradition to another, eventually one can begin to think in the other tradition without translation. Milbank writes, "translation is not the vital crux of the problem of relativism, because to negotiate 'the Other' one can bypass the moment of translation altogether – were this not so, infants would never learn their native tongue." *Ibid.*, 343

of this is that if truth and meaning are both incommensurable then common ground

can exist, for people of different traditions can speak about common issues while

mostly understanding each other if enough effort is expended. As Milbank puts it,

"One can comprehend two different meanings, two different solutions, and yet still

have no means of deciding between them."[295] And if no objective criteria exist to

judge the truthfulness of each tradition over another, then reasons of beauty

(aesthetics) become the tool of persuasion rather than logical proof; one argues that

his or her tradition is the most aesthetically pleasing approach to the world and God.

This of course involves immersing oneself into another tradition in order to truly

understand it, but it seems that this, coupled with the erotic nature of human desire

mentioned above, seems to preserve some semblance of a middle ground without

resorting to a neutral secular sphere.

Which Christianity?

Milbank does seem intent on setting up his own Christian metanarrative, but

a question that needs to be addressed is just how flexible this Christian

metanarrative can be. For clearly there are diverse Christian traditions that

approach Christian philosophy and theology in diverse ways. Taking some of the

main divisions of Christianity, ie., Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and

Protestantism, one wonders if there is enough common ground to speak of a

Christian metanarrative. In this regard, Robert Schreiter argues that Milbank seems

to think the church more unified than it really is. Schreiter writes, "who will have

the right or the ability to tell that story [of Christianity] in new circumstances?

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[295]*Ibid.*, 342

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Augustine's narrative has spawned different, even contradictory readings. Can we really speak of such a unity of narrative?"[296] This touches upon an important issue echoed by many other commentators. To what extent can Milbank's Christian metanarrative be identified with Christianity? Late medieval theology is certainly incompatible with Milbank's project, as chapter one shows. Arguably much reformation theology (Luther, Zwingli and some interpretations of Calvin) is excluded. To give a few possible examples, Luther's forensic justification presupposes Ockham's ontology, while scholastic Calvinism's view of divine sovereignty borders on onto-theology, for it makes divine and human causality on the same level. The issue of divine wrath does not fit very well into Milbank's account, as will be argued below by Hans Boersma.

So how exactly does Milbank think he can speak of a unified Christendom? Arguably he cannot. He can argue that more neo-platonic varieties of Christianity provide excellent metanarratives for both their self-understanding and for interacting with other competing traditions, but this still leaves the gaping hole in the argument as to the lack of intellectual unity within Christendom. The present author tends to agree with Milbank's preference for a Christianized Neo-Platonism, as expressed by the fathers of the Church, but more effort needs to be put towards arguing why exactly this mode of Christian thinking is somehow more fundamental and superior to later medieval developments. Simply saying it is chronologically first, therefore fundamental and superior, only evades this problem. Obviously no external criteria would exist for Milbank to decide this question, but something

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[296] Robert J. Schreiter. "From Postmodernity to Countermodernity: John Milbank's Undertaking." *Continuum* (St. Xavier College (Chicago, Ill)) 3, (January 1, 1994): 286-303. 302

within the Christian *logos* should be able to intimate why Milbank's preferred Neo-Platonic theology is preferable to other Christian traditions. Certainly one could argue that much of Christian thought after Ockham seems indifferent as to whether God is the exemplar of goodness and beauty, perhaps suggesting that an account of God as the exemplar of these is more beautiful narrative. But this is just a hint of the sophisticated reasoning that would be necessary to answer this question satisfactorily.

John Milbank and Traditional Christianity

R. R. Reno, Editor of *First Things* magazine, argues that Milbank engages in a sort of liberal hermeneutics of scripture, which if true would leave Milbank complicit with one of the traditions from which he is at pains to separate himself. When "Milbank engages the biblical text, [he] consistently *translates* the particular sense into a conceptual or speculative process. The Gospel stories are, for him, allegories of a participatory metaphysics."[297] But what specifically is liberal about this? Does not much of the Eastern Metaphysical tradition of the mystics do much the same? The writings of Dionysius or Gregory of Nyssa, for example, interpret much of scripture as pointing to metaphysical and cosmic realities. Reno may be correct to point out that this approach to scripture needs to be argued for with more cogency, but to call it liberal seems misguided.[298]

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[297] Russell R. Reno. "The Radical Orthodoxy Project." *First Things* (2000): 37-44. 40. Quoted in Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology,* 87
[298] Reno goes on to argue that Milbank's approach to the atonement is unsatisfactory due to his speculative reading of the scriptural passages involved. Reno may indeed have a point about this particular issue, but unfortunately this is outside the scope of this thesis and space limitations prevent its exploration.

Another interesting objection from Gavin Hyman is that the relation between Milbank's philosophical Christian metanarrative and the Christian narrative in general is obscure.[299] For Milbank, the task of the theologian is to "tell again the Christian *mythos*, pronounce again the Christian *logos*, and call again for Christian *praxis* in a manner that restores their freshness and originality.[300] But he also admits that his own narrative is "an original, necessary and ongoing supplementation which is yet not violent and subversive in relation to the original."[301] Milbank makes a distinction, but sees no conflict between them. But Hyman makes more of this distinction, arguing that it shows Milbank's Christian metanarrative to be external to the actual narrative of Christianity. And if it is external, then perhaps it contradicts the traditional narrative of Christianity. In *Theology and Social Theory,* Milbank is at pains to explain all of theology in terms of a narrative or story, which leads Frederick Bauerschmidt of Loyola College to claim that "at times Milbank's commitment to certain philosophical positions regarding language push him in directions which seem to run counter to the stories and practices of the church."[302] This is similar to Reno's objection, both hinting that Milbank may be too playful in his postmodern recovery of early church tradition.

Wayne Hankey of Dalhousie University notes a similar problem when he writes that Milbank's theology "is specifically determined in its anti-philosophical stance by its specific location relative to the given philosophy of our time

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[299] Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?*, 86
[300] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 383
[301] *Ibid.*, 423
[302] Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt. "The Word Made Speculative? John Milbank's Christological Poetics." *Modern Theology* 15, no. 4 (1999): 417-432. 429

[Heideggerian/Derridean/Wittgensteinian].”[303] Thus, Milbank's narrative is itself

situated within time and owes its own genealogy of secularism to recent moves in

secular social theory. Does this then drive a wedge between Milbank's thought and

traditional Christianity?

This objection has a great deal of force, for it challenges Milbank to anchor

his own writings in something more substantial than just a narrative. In later works

such as *The Word Made Strange*,[304] Milbank becomes much more explicitly

metaphysical, showing his indebtedness to the Christian metaphysical tradition. In

many ways this metaphysical aspect has been emphasized in this thesis because it is

latent within *Theology and Social Theory*. But one could argue that metaphysics can

only be told using narratives, thus making poetics the method of ontology

(especially if language is always analogical). Therefore, the distinction between

narrative and metaphysics may be somewhat artificial. But if one is not self-

consciously metaphysical and thinks that narrative somehow escapes metaphysics

then one is deluded. In the preface to the second edition of *Theology and Social*

Theory, Milbank seems more self-consciously metaphysical, yet he also criticizes

Aquinas for not emphasizing enough the lingual nature of reason.[305] So while many

are correct to point out that Milbank's account of narrative may be somewhat thin,

his later explicit combination of it with metaphysics is more robust. Then perhaps

the metaphysical speculations of theologians are an extension of the Christian

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[303] Wayne J. Hankey. "Theoria versus Poesis: Neoplatonism and Trinitarian Difference in Aquinas, John Milbank, Jean-Luc Marion and John Zizioulas*." Modern Theology* 15, no. 4 (1999): 387-415. 393. Quoted in Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology,* 89
[304] Milbank, John. *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture*. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997)
[305] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., xxix

narrative, an intensification of its *logos*, which while separate and unable to replace the more basic and less philosophical narrative, enrich it from within. Thus, the relation between the basic Christian narrative and its metaphysical supplement is similar to God's *Logos* being the exact representation of the Father. As to whether such theological supplement can betray its origin, the leading of the Holy Spirit is needed to ensure such faithful mediation.

Of course, this does not answer the above question of which tradition of Christianity provides the metanarrative that can challenge secularism. But in a later interview Milbank is a bit more reserved when asked about how Radical Orthodoxy as a movement responds to this question. He writes:

> We're not necessarily putting forward any one specific Christian metaphysic, but we definitely believe that in the end Christianity is going to be unconvincing if it's not connected to an entire coherent intellectual vision. Not a totalized vision in which all the details are set rigidly, but a vision in which all religious belief and practice connects with, say, nature, or the way you read history, or the way you act in society.[306]

This is a more satisfying answer, for it embraces the particularity and messiness of the historical situation of traditions of Christianity. Thus, perhaps Milbank sees the lasting significance of his work as not providing the only Christian challenge to secularism, but providing a great foundation for many diverse Christian critiques.

Christianity and Violent Mastery

Another critique that is often leveled at Milbank is whether his rejection of secularism results in a sort of violence. This will be explored first in connection with Gavin Hyman's arguments that Milbank engages in intellectual violence, and then in connection with Hans Boersma's questions regarding Milbank and divine violence.

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[306] Simon Oliver and John Milbank. *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader.* (London: Routledge, 2009.) 29

Gavin Hyman thinks that Milbank has created a new dualism between Christianity and Nihilism in which Christianity is the master discourse and nihilism is the suppressed 'other.' Thus, Christianity is actually violent because it tries to overcome and eradicate nihilism. In other words, Christianity puts a limit on what differences are acceptable, while nihilism allows every possibility its legitimacy.[307] Milbank notes that this is a strange criticism, for it misunderstands the erotic nature of Christianity. Christ overcomes nihilism because he and his followers persuade (not coerce) others that the Christian way of life is truly the good life. Milbank appeals to Augustine's and Dionysius' claim that we all have an innate desire for God. For Augustine, we were created for God and our hearts are restless until we rest in God.[308] For Dionysius, utilizing a pun in Greek, God's beauty calls out to us. "Beauty 'bids' all things to itself (whence it is called 'beauty') and gathers everything unto itself."[309] Beauty (καλλος) bids/calls (καλει) is Dionysius' way of expressing that God calls out to all of creation, igniting an erotic desire in those who will recieve it. Thus, Christianity is not merely one intellectual stance out-arguing all others, it is more fundamentally philokalia— the love of the beautiful. Therefore "the 'choice' for peaceful analogy and the Augustinian metanarrative is not really an ungrounded decision, but a 'seeing' by a truly-desiring reason of the truly desirable."[310] Therefore, Christianity only makes sense when it is seen as the fulfillment of other human religions. Not that it cancels all others out, but that the way of peace,

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[307] Except Christianity, of course.
[308] Augustine, E. B. Pusey, and A. H. Armstrong. *The Confessions of St Augustine.* (London: Dent, 1907.) Book I. Chapter I.
[309] Pseudo-Dionysius, *et* al, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, 76
[310] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., xvi

goodness and beauty is the true end of humanity that is realized in the kingdom of God, which was instituted by Christ.

A second but related criticism of Gavin Hyman is that Milbank does not truly overcome dualisms, because Milbank sets up a sort of binary opposition between Christianity and nihilism. Milbank would have us believe that Christianity and nihilism are the two basic 'metanarratives' that can be told about the world. But Hyman argues that the fact that we have two options suggests that there is a greater narrative that can be told, which encompasses both, which he calls a meta-metanarrative. This narrative would speak of the opposition or conflict between nihilism and Christianity. But if this is true, Hyman argues, then the ontology of peace that Milbank favors is itself deconstructed into a greater encompassing narrative of violence.[311] If this argument is true, then Milbank's project is in great peril.

But perhaps Hyman's argument is mistaken. For although he argues for a meta-metanarrative of conflict, one must ask whether this is really a meta-metanarrative or simply a repetition of the nihilist metanarrative. If it is simply a repetition of the latter, then Hyman is not really deconstructing Milbank but is simply pointing out the variety of viewpoints and then concluding that the relationship between them is violent. He is certainly correct to point out that they are different, but to phrase it in terms of violent opposition may not do justice to the concrete ways in which Christianity interacts with other viewpoints. Hyman seems unable to think of Christianity as the fulfillment of opposing thought.

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[311] Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?,* 94

Hyman also misunderstands what Milbank means by metanarrative. Hyman begins this misunderstanding when discussing Milbank's relation to dialectics. He rightly reads Milbank as saying that Hegel and Marx's dialectics are questionable because they conceive the historical moments (such as capitalism, paganism, Christianity, etc.) to be part of a necessary unfolding of history rather than contingent moments of rhetoric. But Hyman strangely concludes from this that the difference between Milbank's metanarrative and Hegel and Marx's is that Milbank "knows his metanarrative to be a 'fiction' whereas Hegel and Marx did not."[312] Hyman is here interpreting 'fiction' as something that is just a story. But this gap in logic is mystifying.

Milbank does indeed call Christianity a fiction, but he means that it is inherently creative, a rhetorical practice that is contingent and beyond the modern dichotomy of realism and anti-realism. As Milbank writes, "'fictive' does not here necessarily mean 'untrue.'"[313] Although Hyman is at pains to point out that Milbank's project goes beyond the simply opposition between realism and anti-realism,[314] because it bypasses the modern epistemology of representation to which it is indebted,[315] his use of 'fiction' here in the sense of a story that forgets it is a story seems to border on anti-realism. His criticism boils down to the view that Milbank forgets that his story is actually false; therefore, he is wrong. Hyman later argues in his book for a fictional nihilism that understands that metanarratives are

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[312] *Ibid.*, 68
[313] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason. 2nd ed.*, 324
[314] Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism*? 63-64
[315] Realism means that a given narrative represents reality accurately, while anti-realism means that a narrative does not represent reality correctly, not because it is false, but because of the impossibility of transcending the narrative to check it against reality. Ibid., 60-61

necessary yet basically untrue.[316] We must pass though theology and nihilism

because both are essentially untrue, resolving instead "to get lost" in the "land of

shadows"[317] where "as we turn into the shadows, distinctions, and ambiguities of

the finite, we thereby move from antinarrative to narrative. Although these finite

narratives must be ultimately left behind."[318] His view seems to be that we are

resigned to a state of constant wandering through many narratives and

metanarratives in a state of constant departure aimlessly roaming to a destination

that never arrives.

The pressing question here is whether Hyman is saying anything

qualitatively different from nihilism. On the one hand, he paints a picture of a more

or less peaceful wandering, where one never really knows what narrative of reality

is true, but without the cosmic violence of Nietzsche and Deleuze. But this lack of a

tradition that is capable of embodying truth to greater or lesser degrees, although

perhaps always imperfectly due to God's excess of what can be said or imagined of

him, is simply the denial of participation and analogy. It still pictures our various

cultural orderings as ruptures or breaks with the noumenal reality that lurks behind

them. It is basically a postmodern liberal theology in which all discourses on God

and reality are equally true or untrue (the difference between them is relativized by

his anti-realism) which means that we never really come to any knowledge of God

or ultimate reality. But is this any different than Kant's metaphysical dogmatism

that was explored in chapter two? Hyman seems to be quite modern in his

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[316] *Ibid.*, 139
[317] *Ibid.*, 140
[318] *Ibid.*, 139

insistence that analogy and participation cannot exist. Because of this, I believe his

"fictional nihilism" is purely modern and thus falls short of achieving any sort of

plausible alternative to Milbank's metanarrative. It is surprisingly close to John

Hick's liberalism that Hyman rightly criticizes earlier in *The Predicament of*

Postmodern Theology.[319]

John Milbank and Divine Violence

Hans Boersma of Regent College criticizes Milbank for not adequately dealing

with violence, especially the ideas of divine punishment and/or redemptive

violence. This is similar to Gavin Hyman's criticism of the inherent violence of

Milbank's thought, but also different in that Boersma is arguing that Milbank needs

to have a greater place for violence in his thought.[320] His questioning seems to come

down to the idea that Milbank's thought must be either a form of universalism or

must incorporate some sort of exclusion – the unrepentant violent are done away

with in an act of apocalyptic redemptive violence. The question is, is Milbank either

a Universalist or a believer in divine violence which is against Milbank's overall

ontology of peace? The difficulty here is that Boersma's dichotomy leaves out the

Eastern Orthodox Tradition. For example, in one strand of Orthodoxy, not everyone

is accepted into the Kingdom of God, yet there is no divine retributive violence, for

hell is a self-exile.[321]

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[319] *Ibid.*, 38-43

[320] Hans Boersma. "*Being Reconciled*" in Smith, James K. A., and James H. Olthuis. *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant, and Participation.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005)

[321] Sergei Bulgakov wrote, "God does not punish; he forgives. Sinful creatures may refuse His forgiveness. This refusal (which may be unending since human free choice can never be destroyed) makes hell to be hell. In a word, God has mercy on all, whether all like." Sergeĭ Nikolaevich Bulgakov. *The Orthodox Church*. (Paris: s.n, 1935.) xiii cf. Although not himself Orthodox, C. S. Lewis expresses

This results from Orthodoxy's Christianized neo-platonic metaphysical tradition. For if one takes Milbank's neo-platonic view of evil as privation seriously, then God could be seen as giving evil over to its own evil. It may be helpful to frame this in terms of creation participating in God, who is equated with the Platonic forms of the Good, the Beautiful, The True, and Being (the Existent). The more that one lives the 'true' life of 'goodness' and 'beauty,' the more being one has, or perhaps the more intensely one 'is.' But if one lives a 'false' life that is characterized by a privation of beauty and goodness, then this person has less being. So it may be possible to construe a sort of apocalyptic violence as God giving in to evil humanity's desire. Evil rejects God, and a fortiori peace, goodness, beauty, truth, and *being.* Perhaps God simply lets them reject God fully, which also means rejecting the divine gift of existence, which in sense blots them out. Or perhaps they will simply be excluded from the eschatological city of God, which is a sort of violence but one that is self-imposed, not divinely imposed. Therefore, Boersma fails to really engage Milbank on the question of universalism and exclusion. Exclusion does not entail God's punishment. As Milbank writes, "it therefore becomes problematic to talk about 'God punishing'… Punishment is ontologically 'self- inflicted', the only punishment is the deleterious effect of sin itself upon nature, and the torment of knowing reality only in terms of one's estrangement from it."[322]

There is one loose end here however. For if not everyone ends up in the Kingdom of God, even if exclusion is self exile, then does this not leave a sort of

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this Orthodox doctrine quite clearly in his popular book: C. S. Lewis. *The Problem of Pain*. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2001.) Chapter 7: Hell
[322] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed., 426

dualism of evil over against good? In other words, if evil even as privation exists

eternally in hell, then in some sense evil is never truly overcome and it becomes

possible to define good and evil in terms of one another, rather than evil merely as a

parasite upon the good. Milbank hints at Origenism in *Theology and Social Theory*,

but does not give enough detail to be useful here.[323] Filling in the blanks from the

Church Father Origen's writings will be instructive:

> But our belief is, that the Word shall prevail over the entire rational creation,
> and change every soul into His own perfection; in which state every one, by
> the mere exercise of his power, will choose what he desires, and obtain what
> he chooses…Let them also carefully consider the promise [in Zephaniah 3],
> that all shall call upon the name of the LORD, and serve Him with one consent;
> also that all contemptuous reproach shall be taken away, and there shall be
> no longer any injustice, or vain speech, or a deceitful tongue.[324]

In this way, evil will not be set eternally over against the goodness of God and of the

restored creation, yet it is not a crass universalism either. Simple universalism in

which everyone goes to heaven or is reconciled to God regardless of his or her

beliefs or actions on earth is in secret collusion with a coercive model of

evangelization, for the individual will cannot eternally reject even if it will to do so.

On the contrary, Origen's position states that every will will eventually be persuaded

and willingly conformed to Christ. Thus, it is qualitatively different than more

popular conceptions of universalism.

Gregory of Nyssa (335-395), one of the Cappadocian Fathers of the Church,

has a similar account of the final reconciliation with God. He wrote, "it is not

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[323] *Ibid.*, 427

[324] Origen, "*Origen Against Celsus*", trans. Frederick Crombie In , in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume IV: Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 667.

punishment chiefly and principally that the Deity, as Judge, afflicts sinners with; but

He operates, as your argument has shown, only to get the good separated from the

evil and to attract it into the communion of blessedness."[325] Thus, the punishment

that does exist is a purging and remedial effort, not retribution for sins committed.

Perhaps one could object that this is still a form of divine violence, but if it is, it is

qualitatively different from the retribution that Boersma wants Milbank to have. In

Theology and Social Theory, Milbank seems closer to Origen's account, but his later

book *Being Reconciled* could be read as sympathetic with Gregory of Nyssa's view of

a rehabilitative punishment. This will be discussed below.

Although Boersma does seem mistaken in his characterization of Milbank, he

does point out that Milbank may have lightened his rhetoric on violence in later

writings. For example in *Being Reconciled*, Milbank writes,

> It is because we can only be good collectively that we cannot exercise pure
> peaceableness alone. Once there is violence, we are all inevitably violent. And
> violence can only be eradicated collectively, by a strange apocalyptic
> counter-violence, which is in the end a divine prerogative, yet is also
> obscurely anticipated within time."[326]

But as he later writes, "in the penultimate, which both peace and conflict now

sometimes anticipate, there will be fought the unthinkable and for us aporetic

'conflict against conflict'. However, in the ultimate beyond the last battle, even the

refusal of evil will be redundant: then there will be only peace."[327] Finishing this

thought he writes, "we can only try to force force [sic] with reserve and with hopeful

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[325] Gregory of Nyssa, "*On the Soul and the Resurrection*", trans. William Moore In , in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, Volume V: Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, Etc.*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1893), 451.
[326] John Milbank. *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*. (London: Routledge, 2003.) 42,
[327] *Ibid.*, 43

risk that distorted realities will come to repent. This is the best we can do; our scenario is apocalyptic, not utopian."[328] So while this may be a concession to Hyman's earlier critique that Milbank implicitly endorsed violence in *Theology and Social Theory*, it is only partially so. For this new line of thought in Milbank does not necessarily push Milbank in the direction of God retributively punishing sinners, as Boersma hopes, for a restorative punishment could be involved.

But also against Hyman, Milbank thinks that pacifism "is linked with an over-valuation of freedom, since it assumes that forcing a person's will is the worst thing possible; even though in subtle ways, we of course do this all the time."[329] Thus, Hyman's horror is linked with his liberalism (as I argued above) and is complicit with his very modern individualism. For his image of the nomad wandering through the desert is one in which the nomad is indifferent to the content of the world around him or her. Imposing your own ideas upon another is the worst thing imaginable because it reduces the 'other' to yourself. But contrary to this liberal interpretation, one could argue that it is a genuine care for the other, rather than indifference, that pushes one to impose the good upon someone who is doing evil or violent deeds, for you are trying to lead them to self-fulfillment, not self-negation.

Is this a form of violence or liberation? It is difficult to adjudicate in such a short space, but as Milbank argues, Christianity is ultimately about persuasion not coercion, but when one's evil and violence threaten others around them, perhaps coercion can be a preventative measure against greater violence. But this is ultimately not about evangelism or the spread of the gospel, for that can only result

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[328] *Ibid.*
[329] *Ibid.*

from persuasion. This sort of coercion that Milbank now thinks can be good, is

linked with loving your neighbor, not evangelism. This distinction is crucial for it

shows that Christianity is truly is a religion that does not coerce in its spread, but it

is also a religion that demands the protection of one's neighbor from harm. So it is a

religion that overcomes the powers of the world through the fulfillment of our *eros*

(as argued above), but tragic instances of violently defending the helpless may be

necessary along the way. So while Milbank certainly does change his tone

concerning violence in later writings, he still does not fall prey to the difficulties that

Boersma accuses him of.

Final Verdict

In light of everything that has been said, what then is the status of Milbank's

project in general and in *Theology and Social Theory* in particular? The present

author's opinion is that Milbank is correct in the general structures of his thought,

namely that Christianity has deep resources to combat secular theory of all stripes.

This of course does not mean that Christianity defeats secular theory; rather that

theology is capable of holding its own and can be intellectually respectable again

when offering its own thoughts on contemporary issues. Some of the details of this

argument are not developed enough in *Theology and Social Theory*; hence the need

to bring in the work of some of his colleagues. The continuing publications from the

movement Radical Orthodoxy also show that Milbank's work is far from finished,

though understanding Milbank's postmodernism should make one question

whether the task can ever be finished.

Perhaps the status of this particular work in theology is precisely how it functioned historically: James K. A. Smith writes, "while not quite a Barthian bombshell, John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* did land with considerable impact on contemporary theology. In retrospect, it was this tome that became something of a manifesto for an agenda that would later be described as Radical Orthodoxy."[330] As such, perhaps it is best viewed as a clarion call to Christian thinkers to recover the strength and sophistication of their philosophical heritage and bring it to bear upon contemporary issues. Radical Orthodoxy as a movement has done this. Many within and without Radical Orthodoxy have criticized Milbank on foundational issues (the pertinent dealt with above), but also in minor things that are far from resolved. Perhaps the greatest strength of Milbank's work is that it forced contemporary theorists to deal with the depths of the Patristic and Medieval Christian tradition rather than only modern developments of the tradition. Therefore, the force and trajectory of Radical Orthodoxy is perhaps more important than just *Theology and Social Theory,* but this book certainly laid a strong foundation.

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[330] James K. A. Smith. *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004.) 33-34

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