

John Milbank and the Deconstruction of the Secular

By Bengt Rasmusson, 2007-03-02

Even if not quite an Barthian bombshell, John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*¹ did really chock its audience (theologians and social theorists) when it first appeared more than one and half decade ago. Even if the chock has worn off, the book in some ways rewrote the theological (and sociological) landscape. The book was the precursor of what later should be known as "Radical Orthodoxy".

Part I

Milbank starts with the counterintuitive claim: "Once, there was no 'secular'" (p. 9). The secular realm is not something given in the "beginning of times", it is imagined. And the interesting thing about this imagining is that it is fundamentally religious and theological in origin and constitution. The secular discourse, argues Milbank, "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" (p. 3).

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'secular'."*

In trying to support this claim, he focuses on modern social theory and traces through an 'archaeological' approach the genesis of the main forms of secular reason. While tracing the genesis back to the late middle ages, the carving out of a secular space becomes especially evident with the development of the "new science of politics" (e.g. Hobbes' "heretical" version talking about "the war of all against all" and the necessity of contractual relationships, and Machiavelli's "pagan" version, appealing to a different mythos of civic *virtù* and instrumental manipulation). Through an appropriation of the Christian semantics of *dominium* and *imago Dei*, equated with a conception of the autonomous will, the secular becomes understood in terms of pure autonomous power and complicit with an 'ontology of violence'.

If the *creation* of the secular, with emphasis on freedom and autonomy, was the important thing for "new science of politics", the eighteenth century "political economy" (e.g. Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus) was interested in the regulation and conservation of power (by the State and the market) and appropriated the Christian semantics of *providence* (talking about a God regularly present and holding everything together rather than the ultimate arbitrary power behind human power). It becomes a kind of "social theodicy". We find here, says Milbank, "a concern to display history as the natural process of the self-emergence of an immanent reason, *within which* 'man' or 'humanity' arises. ... Here again, the institution of the 'secular' is paradoxically related to a shift *within* theology and not an emancipation *from* theology" (p. 28)

The "new science of politics" and "political economy" is the roots and the content of the liberal discourse. It presupposed the isolated and self-conserving individual and it was from the

¹ Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1990, 2006. This paper is a summary of pp. xi–205.

interrelationship between such individuals that the political and the economic were constructed as an artifice. In the nineteenth century a French positivism arose (e.g. Malebranche and Durkheim), which not only talked about the individual, but also about the “social whole”. The “social” or “society” was something given, a “positive” datum, a fundamentally ahistorical category, with which one could explain other human phenomena. Here we have the emergence of “sociology”, and also of a new kind of social theology.

Beside the French tradition we also have the German tradition (e.g. Rickert, Simmel, Weber and Troeltsch) with its Kantian and neo-Kantian philosophy, as the second source of modern sociology. Here the “religious” and the “social” become separate realms and the former relegated to the private sphere. Religion becomes in its essence an extra-social affair. And so the underlying conception of the autonomous secular realm persisted.

The twentieth century sociology in general and sociology of religion in particular continues this tradition and is described by Milbank as a “secular policing of the sublime” (p. 106). Religion becomes reduced to mere social functions, e.g. integration, coping with the exceptional and problematic, and as social self-occlusion or ideology.

From this treatise on positivism, Milbank goes on to dialectics, giving mixed reviews of both Hegel and Marx. While they give helpful analyses of history and society, they still worked with a kind of “original violence” as they formulated their modern myths of progress and conflict. In the end Hegel’s political theory, says Milbank, “begins with the self-seeking individual and concludes with the quasi-subject of the State organism” (p. 173). Marx remains, in the final analysis, couched within a scientific positivism and also within the perspectives of liberalism and secular modernity when talking about the eschatological socialist utopia as “the unleashing of human freedom and the unlimited possibility of human transformation of nature” (p. 177).

I stop the summary here, as we will cover the second half of the book in the next part.

It is an interesting (even if rather sweeping) “archaeology” of the genesis of the secular and the secular social theory Milbank gives. It becomes evident that despite all its pretensions to the contrary, secular modernity is not areligious, just differently religious, a religion of immanence and autonomy. It is simply another *mythos*, an alternative confession, whose governing assumptions actually are more or less “bound up with the modification or the rejection of orthodox Christian positions” (p. 1). And therefore, “‘scientific’ social theories are themselves theologies or anti-theologies in disguise” (p. 3).

It is tragic that Christian theology has become so attracted to this *mythos*, has accepted secularization and the autonomy of secular reason, instead of seeing the world – without apology – from inside the Christian metadiscourse itself. And therefore it has inevitably been positioned by secular reason, with the consequence of either dressing theology in some immanent field of knowledge such as natural science, sociology or psychology, or letting itself be confined to the private sphere or a sublimity beyond representation.

Maybe it is as Milbank says, that the “pathos of modern theology is its false humility” (p. 1). But is there a risk that Milbank perhaps – in his way of developing a kind of rhetorical hyper-narrative and his claim to offer theology as “the ultimate ‘social science’” (p. 6) – replaces false humility with a kind of absolutifying arrogance, a kind of epistemological violence and possessive mastery that makes a fruitful dialogue with other sciences difficult? Shouldn’t the church practice the epistemological virtue of patience, in which knowledge unfolds in fragments and ad hoc alliances and resists the violent tendency to silence the other? Milbank says that “theology, alone, remains the discourse of non-mastery” (p. 6) – doesn’t this book in itself, in a way, contradict this standpoint?

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And what does it mean in practice, when he declares theology to be the master discourse of the future? What does it mean for the academy? For the Church?

There is also another important question which has popped up: is Milbank’s theology sufficiently Christological? But that question we probably have to put on hold until we have read the second half of the book.

Part II

In the final chapter of his sub-treatise on “theology and dialectics” Milbank once more asserts that a Christian social theology cannot hope to succeed by dialectical accommodation, by seeking a kind of alliance between Christianity and the thought of Hegel and Marx. The result of such an alliance is only a religious legitimization to an unmodified secular vision. He takes here political theology and liberation theology as his examples. In the wake of the “integralist revolution” (integrating grace and nature, sacred and secular), initiated by the second Vatican Council, these theologies (rightly) argue that since all of life is imbued with grace, you cannot separate socio-political concerns from “spiritual” concerns.

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But the problem is, according to Milbank, that these theologies allied themselves to the German source of the integralist revolution (Rahner and transcendental Thomism), with its attraction to correlation and mediation in trying to “naturalize the supernatural”, instead of the French source (Blondel, Lubac, Congar, Urs von Balthasar, and the *nouvelle théologie*), with its trying to “supernaturalize the natural” by simultaneously emphasizing the supernatural end of human nature and that this end always must be received as pure gift. Therefore, contends Milbank, these theologies “remains trapped within the terms of ‘secular reason’, and its unwarranted foundationalist presuppositions” (p. 207). The French version of integralism points instead, he concludes, in a benign “postmodern” direction.

After the collapse of the modernist metanarratives of Marxism and sociology, what is left? Only postmodern nihilistic difference? This is, one could say, the question of the fourth and last sub-treatise on “theology and difference.”

In Milbank’s expository dialogue with the postmodernism of our times (with special reference to thinkers like Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Lyotard) a picture emerges that shows how this postmodernism in the final analysis turns out to be not a rejection of secular reason but its most radical expression.

This postmodernism is characterized by, says Milbank, an *absolute historicism or nihilistic genealogy* that stops telling the stories of a constant human subject and discloses the will-to-power behind all knowledge, narratives and cultures (even so called “scientific” knowledge and narratives, see ch. 9). This historicism requires and is built upon an *ontology of difference or violence* which tells us that violence has both the first and the last word in human history.

Despite its historicist perspective this postmodernism presents this ontology as something *more than mythical*, as a kind of fundamental ontology, and so lapses back into a kind of transcendentalism. And all of this flows into an *ethical nihilism* that “teaches the needlessness of regret, and the necessity for resignation... freedom is only a reality as arbitrary power” (p. 317, 318).

What emerges in postmodernism is a mythology which is, contends Milbank in his devastating critique, “the final, most perfect form of secular reason, in some ways reverting to and developing the neo-paganism of Machiavelli ... the best, the least self-deluded, self-description of the secular, which fails only at the point where it will not admit that it has shown the secular to be but another ‘religion’. ... The secular *episteme* is a post-Christian paganism ... an ‘Anti-Christianity’” (p. 279, 280).

This “malign”, nihilistic postmodernism is according to Milbank today challenged by a more “benign” postmodernism, which “advocates some form of return to the perspectives of antique political philosophy” (p. 327) and is best represented by Alasdair MacIntyre. Milbank agrees with his emphasis on virtue, narrative and tradition, but sees in his argumentation against nihilism in the name of virtue and tradition *in general* a new mode of foundationalism. Instead Milbank argues that it is the specific *content* of Christian virtue and tradition (e.g. charity and forgiveness, in contrast to for instance Aristotle’s heroic virtue which fortify the ontological priority of conflict) that can stand as an alternative to nihilism. And in this context he also shows that narrative is not a formal appendage to the Christian faith, because “the story of the development of a tradition ... really is the argument for the tradition” (p. 349).

Milbank then concludes with a discussion and presentation, inspired by Augustine (and Dionysius), of the Christian vision, by sketching out a “counter-history” which tells the story of all history from the point of the emergence of the Church as an *altera civitas* but also as an ecclesial self-critique, a “counter-ethics” which describe the different practice of the Church, and a “counter-ontology” which forms the frame of reference implicit in the Christian story.

And here appears – against the background of God’s creation as free gift and God’s being as Trinity – a vision of reality that is not chaos, violence or nihilism, but the “infinite flow of excessive charitable difference” (p. 381) in participation in God. Virtue is to be found in friendship with God, friendship with God resolves around the practices of charity and forgiveness, truth is “participation of the beautiful in the beauty of God” (p. 434), and the Church “is the *telos* of the salvific process” (p. 407). This is a vision where peace has the first and last word.

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This is an impressive book, intelligent in its argumentation, fascinating in its historical surveys and archaeologies, and provocative in its conclusions. It is a classic. But still, in the end I feel a little bit of a disappointment regarding his constructive conclusions.

This is not only a book about theology *and* social theory, but also about theology *as* social theory. And a Christian social theory is, says Milbank, “first and foremost an *ecclesiology*” (p. 383, his emphasis). But why then has he so little to say about the embodied social content of this ecclesiology? If the Church is a “counter-polis”, why then is his discussion about the church as a concrete social alternative so vague? Why doesn’t he talk about the Church as the “other city” in the context of witness and *missio Dei*? Can it be because of an inadequate Christology? In his eagerness to lift up the power of God as Creator, he seems to downplay the suffering power of the crucified God. In his emphasis on the incarnated *logos*, he seems to downplay the identity and character of Jesus, the concrete details of Jesus life, death, and resurrection. And doesn’t this run the risk of emptying the content of the Church, making it stand out more in it’s negative contrast than as an concrete, positive, socially embodied argument? (It is here interesting to note the huge difference between Yoder’s *The Politics of Jesus* and Milbank’s argumentation in the end of this book.) Is perhaps Chris Huebner right when he says that Milbank’s project (in the light of what he contends to be an inadequate Christology and a relativizing of the people of God as both Israel and the body of Christian disciples) “appears to be devoted to the Constantinian task of developing a civilizational religion. ... [O]ne gets the sense that he wants the church to simply supplant the world rather than embodying a concrete alternative in the midst of it.”²

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And in the final analysis this also cast a shadow over his ontology of peace. This problematic is not only to be found in his kind of possessive argumentation which I in my previous paper asked if it not exemplified an epistemological violence, but also in his discussion about the need in some circumstances for a non-peaceful coercion that “can still be ‘redeemed’ by retrospective acceptance, and so contribute to the final goal of peace” (p. 424, cf. 428–429). Isn’t this

² *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity* (Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 2006), p. 157-158.

instrumental reasoning an example of a residual “secular reason”, which you could contend has its background in his downplaying of Jesus life, death and resurrection?