

# Preface

Vexatious debates on gender, sex and the resurrection in the mass media mask less fashionable but more significant shifts in recent theological reflections on modern culture. Some of these shifts are exemplified in John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990). This original, irritating and unfashionable work, the product of a lay Anglican theologian, is generating waves of perplexed comment. It is an orthodox Christian assault on secular philosophy and sociology that seeks to restore the metanarrative of theology to an ecclesia that provides an ontology of peace within an Augustinian vision. The book seeks to stiffen theologians against the false allures of a crumbling modern thought that never quite escaped the grasp of God. It moves with ease from the comedy of sociology's foundation to the tragedy of nihilism that infects the postmodern condition to produce a book that is as memorable as it is unexpected in its ideals.

It is unusual for a single book to attract two special issues of journals. *Modern Theology* is giving over its October 1992 issue to this book. In this special issue of *New Blackfriars*, three Catholics and two Anglicans have responded to its provocative themes. Since the symposia held in 1978–1979 at Blackfriars, that produced the splendid, but unjustly neglected collection of essays, *Sociology and Theology Alliance and Conflict*, the battlefield separating the two disciplines has been a bit too quiet. Milbank's new book disrupts that peace.

As his book is long and extremely dense, the five contributors have given a diversity of responses that should stimulate interest. Whilst the braveness of the book is admired, for turning aspects of postmodernity on their head, and for wresting a holy vision from the rubble of contemporary philosophy, all the contributors share certain worries. The breadth and depth of his theological and philosophical reading is not in doubt, hence the unexpected grace of what he envisages and the need to attend to what he says. Critical worries focus on ecclesial matters which unexpectedly haunt this book.

Williams and Nichols seek a more fleshed out theology, one that would pay more attention to its history and processes of evolution. Williams is impressed with Milbank's dismantling of much of the rhetoric of liberation theology but wonders at the practical basis of the peace which follows and how it can escape violence. Ward shares this

worry about Milbank's ontology of peace and wonders how far his own narrative escapes issues of difference and analogy. There is a feeling that Milbank's cleverness yields an unexpectedly unworldly return. Other critical reservations arise. Nichols finds an unacceptable theological and ecclesial price in the book. He admires the wresting of revelation from secular culture but wonders at the nature of the church to which Milbank, as an Anglican, appeals. Nichols regards the message of the book as 'deplorable'. All contributors applaud the victory Milbank has won over secular thought but wonder at the cost. In his general overview on the book, Kerr admires the way Milbank uses a simple Christian orthodox vision to overthrow a multitude of disciplinary doubts, but wonders if its thesis is sustainable. Flanagan suggests Milbank has caricatured sociological approaches to religion and has assassinated a discipline which theology still needs. In the final contribution, Milbank has the last word.

The main difficulty with Milbank's book is that it mercilessly exposes the deficiencies of modernity at a time when we know little of what comes next. Since 1988, there has been a flood of excellent writing on modern culture that runs across theology, sociology and philosophy. Although feminist and creative theology might gain the most media attention, the more significant reflections on God's relationship to modern culture are coming unreported from within philosophy and sociology. Issues of aesthetics, the self and its reflexive nature, the authentic reproduction of culture and the problems of meaning it generates in late capitalism, have all come together in a climate of immense political change, where Marxism has collapsed, feminism has fractured into thousands of brands, where deconstruction no longer attracts and where New Age Religions distract. Reflections on the meaningfulness of culture have raised issues of ultimate belief, of choice over ethics, a quest for the serious that is at odds with the reproduction of trivia endlessly available in the pastiches of postmodernity sold on the cultural marketplace of desire. Illusion and disillusion are mingled in a frenetic manner that offers no trust in the products of modern culture. This need to re-think fundamental understandings of culture have placed it as an issue in the heart of philosophy and sociology. There seems to be something theologically unsafe about modernity as it staggers into its post phrase. We seem to be after everything and before nothing. Philosophy and sociology have become unexpectedly vulnerable to theological arguments which Milbank has exploited to the full, hence the importance of this timely book.

Milbank's book forms part of a wider channelling of philosophy and sociology into theological issues. From the Catholic side, MacIntyre's

work and that of Charles Taylor come to mind. The recent translation of Jean-Luc Marion's *God Without Being* (1991) offers a similarity to Milbank's work in that a Catholic theological orthodoxy forms the basis of a highly sophisticated critique of the usual nihilistic tramlines of modern philosophy. In Marion's argument, faith and charity are preserved on the Eucharist site in a sharp critique of metaphysics that places revelation over reason. Both books are in the hunt after virtue.

These two highly orthodox Christian works complement the quest for meaning in the context of a disenchantment with modernity notably expressed by two Jewish writers, George Steiner and Zygmunt Bauman. Like Milbank, Bauman regards sociology as a scapegoat for the nihilism buried in modernity. Sociology is placed squarely in the theological frame and is found wanting in his celebrated book *Modernity and the Holocaust*.

In his pioneering book, *Real Presences*, Steiner portrayed poignantly the emptiness of aesthetics and a culture denied a spiritual vision and a sense of the transcendent. At the end of the book, he writes movingly of 'the long day's journey of the Saturday' as the time of the modern thinker who is neither a Christian nor a believer. Milbank has provided an Easter Sunday book, a brave new tract about an old message, presented anew amidst the alien thorns of modern philosophy and sociology.

Kieran Flanagan