

# **Not the Whole Story: Another Response to John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory***

## Part II

### John Daniels

#### **The story so far**

This paper is an attempt to respond to John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* from a perspective informed by hermeneutical phenomenology. In the first part, the 'classical' distinction of explanation and understanding was defended against Milbank's critique by reference to Paul Ricoeur's account of the distanciation/appropriation polarity. It was argued that Milbank's account does not sufficiently grasp identity as a hierarchical synthesis of 'ironic' identities which reflect different degrees and kinds of distanciation from the paramount reality of everyday life (see Schutz 1962a, 1975). The explanation/understanding binary therefore retains a validity insofar as it draws attention to the way in which different readings variously manifest the moments of distanciation and appropriation.

With this groundwork in view, the second part of the paper sets out to examine Milbank's understanding of the role of Christian theology *vis-à-vis* other accounts of being and the adequacy of the category of narration.

#### **Where is theology?**

Milbank declares *Theology and Social Theory* to be an attempt to counter the widespread tendency of recent theology to allow itself to be positioned by sociology and other secular theorisings. His strategy is to turn the tables and locate these other discourses from the standpoint of 'theology'. After all, he insists, metacritical scrutiny exposes them to be heretical anti-theologies which should therefore be abandoned wholesale by the Christian; instead, 'theology need only embrace as absolute its own narrative' (Milbank 1990: 268). Much of the book is consequently an archaeological dig around the foundations of modern,

secular, social theories, a dig which uncovers foundations which are judged to be inherently inimical to Christian thought and practice. Myths of primordial violence are found to lurk concealed at every turn of the archaeologist's trowel, myths which proffer ways of living quite at odds with 'the emanation of harmonious difference' embedded within the Trinitarian narrative (Milbank 1990: 434). Milbank's thesis presents us with a clear choice: either the myth of original violence which validates only the arbitrary results of the exercise of sheer power, or the myth of original peace which validates the promotion of harmonious, non-coercive difference underpinned by the aesthetic criteria governing non-identical repetition. Which is it to be?

The starkness of this choice has been registered by, among others, Gillian Rose (Rose 1993: 38-51). It should not surprise us to find her detecting an incipiently totalitarian strain in the *a priori* refusal to countenance negotiation. Basic to our historical situation, according to Rose, is the diremption of Athens and Jerusalem, of politics and ethics, of negotiation and principle. The strategy of 'holiness' pursued by Milbank and other 'holy nomads' amounts merely to a premature attempt to mend the 'broken middle' occasioned by this diremption. This attempt is misconceived since it refuses to examine the nature of this brokenness, an examination which 'would show how these holy nomads arise out of and reinforce the unfreedom they prefer not to know' (Rose 1993: 47). Rose reads *Theology and Social Theory* as advocating an universal Christian metanarrative which unfolds authentically only according to its own internal storyline and in isolation from the necessarily corrupting influence of other, competing *muthoi*; it is not hard to see why she does so. Yet things are not quite this simple: another, rather different reading is also possible. As Lewis Ayres notes, sections of *Theology and Social Theory* reflect a much more nuanced approach which, if accorded due weight, significantly qualify the book's thesis. When read in the light of Milbank's larger corpus, these qualifications become increasingly accentuated (Ayres 1995: 28). Some attention to these qualifying arguments is therefore in order.

In a typically dense section entitled 'Narrative, relativism and dialectics', Milbank offers an intriguing discussion of plurality. Taking up the discussion of multilinguality in relation to inter-traditional rationality initiated by Alasdair MacIntyre in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, he admits that 'one can *entertain* culturally alien meanings, understand them at least up to a point, yet without embracing them' (Milbank 1990: 341). This happens through the application of 'theatrical brackets' which locates such meanings as it were alongside those meanings which one has 'embraced'. We are therefore constituted

typically as multiple identities, even if some of these are only 'entertained'. Multilinguality then requires a form of self-alienation rather than, as others would have it, a form of 'transcendent' identity which establishes linguistic equivalences between discursive schemes.

At this point, Milbank's argument almost allows him to converge with Rose's advocacy of an internalization of negotiation, issuing in a somewhat 'ironic' identity; Milbank however is reluctant to take the final step of envisaging a mutually modifying concourse between different worlds of meaning, restricting the scope of dialectic, as he does, to the exposure of intra-traditional inconsistencies. Similarly, there is also some convergence with the phenomenological approach adopted here. Doubtless unintentionally, the concession that alien meanings may be entertained within 'brackets' ineluctably evokes the *epoche* or phenomenological reduction, although that which is bracketed in the latter context is the student's usual beliefs (Van der Leeuw 1986: 645–6); again, 'one's usual ruminations', in Milbank's phrase, are presumably similarly bracketed during the entertainment of alien meanings. Certainly, there is every indication that the differentiated structure of the life-world is being acknowledged. So what remains as disputed? A brief excursus, to elaborate the phenomenology of the life-world, is required to bring clarity here.

Among the provinces of meaning comprising the differentiated structure of the life-world, that of everyday life is marked out as constituting paramount reality because it relates to corporeal engagement with the world according to a set of fundamental intentions which represent the need to comply with the basic requirements of life—to eat, drink, etc.: it is the province of meaning which ultimately matters. The life-world consists, then, in various strata of relevancies, all relative to the primacy of everyday life (Schutz 1962a). Schutz also notes, however, that the life-world need not be a wholly coherent structure; indeed he observes that 'the existence of several symbolic systems which are loosely, if at all, connected with each other, is the special feature of our own historical situation' (Schutz 1962b: 332).<sup>1</sup>

Translated into Milbank's language, existence typically occurs not as a single, monolithic narrative but rather as a multiplicity of narratives which interweave, not all of which are necessarily mutually compatible but which nevertheless coexist and fluctuate in priority within an existence which is at least roughly unified (multiple personality disorder being considered to be a minority affliction). Ricoeur makes the point that each individual and community carries multiple narrative identities and that the quasi-unified whole arising from these is the result of narratives which are both historical and

fictional in nature. Narrative identity is in fact a dynamic quality which eludes both the unchanging sameness of monolithic identity and the simple otherness of unrelated temporal sequence (Ricoeur 1988: 246-9)1.

Identity therefore emerges from these considerations as inherently 'ironic': the transcendental synthesis of multiple profiles, each issuing from the inhabitation of a distinct narrative. However at the centre of this existential complex we may speak of a root identity correlated with the paramount reality of everyday life. One may, at the risk of multiplying neologisms, correlate this root identity, or 'self', with metanarrative; and the multiple subordinate profiles with multiple 'epinarratives' or 'paranarratives'. This 'self' is both the result of the interweaving of narratives and the arbiter of taste in discriminating between the myriad narratives which daily confront us<sup>2</sup>. The differentiated structure of existence is indeed acknowledged by Milbank, as we have seen; however in the absence of the possibility of the transcendence of semantic worlds, we are left with a picture of existence akin to that of the demonized man in the gospels whose name was Legion (Mark 5:9). Neither is the potential for affirming an 'ironic' identity in the manner of Rose taken up. What is missing is an account of multiple narrative identities which recognises not only plurality but also a synthesising hierarchy of significance rooted in everyday life.

Milbank does however go some way towards meeting this deficiency in chapter 12 of his more recent publication, *The Word Made Strange*. In 'On complex space' we find commended a social polity modelled on gothic architecture, in which there always exist possibilities for augmentation which are not limited by 'the totalizing grasp of the whole'; thus 'there is always room to adjust to the innovations made by free subjects, without thereby surrendering the quest for harmonic coherence' (Milbank 1997: 277). The image of the gothic cathedral does helpfully amplify the pluralistic trajectory discernible in *Theology and Social Theory* yet also develops it further. In the latter volume we do find Milbank ready to admit the possibility of 'complex narrative negotiations' which necessitate 'retelling the ecclesial story so as to accept some external criticisms' (p.268). One senses this to be a somewhat reluctant concession; moreover, there remains the question of how these 'negotiations' are to be arbitrated—resembling as they do the dreaded dialectic which Milbank so forcefully rebuts. 'On complex space', by contrast, offers a much more obviously hospitable, pluralistic vision which differs markedly in tone from *Theology and Social Theory* and represents a notable shift in emphasis.

It could be argued, nonetheless, that the change is merely one of

tone and not substance, since exclusive loyalty to the Christian narrative—as commended by Milbank—actually requires the hospitable ‘entertaining’ of other *muthoi* (cf. ‘The name of Jesus’ in Milbank 1997): the practice inaugurated by Jesus entails such a kenotic attitude by the Church as she faithfully seeks its non-identical repetition. While this is a valid point, questions still remain. First, where can there possibly be room for accommodating pagan ‘anti-theologies’ founded on heretical narratives of primordial strife, i.e. sociologies of which, we are told, Christianity need not take account (Milbank 1990: 3)? Second, if we overlook this (surely substantial) difficulty and opt for a more pluralistic reading of *Theology and Social Theory*, what becomes of the case against Ricoeur’s methodology? How much will they differ in practice, if not in terms of formal expression? This question is already raised when we read that

[i]n place of (facing up to) the irremovable granite block of suspicion which appears as the essence of finitude, it [theology] needs to take account of the multiple but ‘unfounded’ suspicions (some, indeed, unthinkable without the work of Marx, Durkheim and Freud) which can be raised about Christianity...

Milbank 1990: 268

How, in practice, does ‘facing up to a granite block’ differ from ‘taking account’ of ‘unfounded suspicions’?

It begins to look as if , in order to render his position tenable in the light of obvious objections from a more pluralistic quarter, Milbank is obliged to qualify the overall thrust of his thesis in ways which significantly reduce its distinctiveness. Milbank’s tactics betray a tacit acknowledgement that ‘narration’ itself is not a sufficiently differentiated tool of analysis and can only be retained in a modified form which recognises that ‘different levels of discourse [are] necessary if we are to describe the nature of faith and God’s presence’ (Ayres 1995: 29-30).

I wish to claim that a ‘pluralistic’ reading of *Theology and Social Theory*’s methodology can be expressed in a manner which is both more consistent and more illuminating by deploying the appropriation-distanciation dialectic. Through distanciation I see myself as others see me; and that must surely require the ability and readiness to entertain narratives which call into question those prevailing in my life-world: thus ideology can be critiqued and existential possibilities re-visioned. It is the ‘critical moment’ which Ricoeur identifies as that which distinguishes speculative and poetic discourses (Ricoeur 1978b: 313). While it is the vocation of the poet to witness through art to

appropriation by being, it is the vocation of the speculative thinker to always question the absoluteness of any such witness—certainly when it has acquired a sedimented form—by a readiness to assume a detached perspective through distanciation. In this regard it is of first importance that the Christian community (if not each individual) should be both a poet and a speculative thinker in this sense. For what is at stake is a truthful existence which authentically manifests both moments—appropriation and distanciation—which are given as part of our thrownness.

Such an attitude of authenticity may be named *detachment*. In his *Husserlian Meditations*, Robert Sokolowski discusses this attitude with reference to the example of Socrates. Socrates was a thoroughly loyal Athenian and yet was able to suspend ‘world-belief’ and appreciate that there was more to the world than its conventionally Athenian profile—there were also those of Sparta, of Persia and so on. The Sophist response to this trans-cultural awareness was to abandon citizenship of any state and to reduce philosophy to a mere exercise in manipulative self-aggrandisement: ‘truth’ is altogether abandoned in the wake of the welter of narratives assaulting the ears. Yet Socrates’ response, true to the vision of existence as situated transcendence, was to appreciate that there are many ways of ‘being truthful’; to appreciate each narrative as a profile of the world which transcends all profiles. Other narratives are then eligible to appear not necessarily as rivals but as potential enrichments of his own, still fundamentally Athenian, view.

The secret of Socratic detachment is to... preserve the integrity of the truthfulness we are examining, to treat it with sympathy, to recover it hermeneutically, but also to remain distinct and unsubordinated to it... [O]ne cannot be a partisan or competitor in one of the regular exercises of being truthful.

Sokolowski 1974: 203

In other words, loyalty to one’s tradition and detachment (in this sense) from it are not incompatible.

What is the status of this detachment? Milbank might reply that it instantiates a particular culturally inscribed *muthos* (or a facet thereof). Is this a specifically Christian profiling of existence? Or a profile deriving from a heretical anti-theology? Or can one, in this day and age, still claim that Socratic detachment somehow pertains to the human as such?

By its own account, phenomenology does not seek to name things-in-being and their relationships, but rather to name the structures of intentional existence itself. One already knows, pre-thematically, all that phenomenology could possibly describe. To understand a putative

phenomenological description is therefore also to verify it; no further investigation is required (Sokolowski 1974: 239-49). Yet, the thematization of knowledge inevitably must be in terms of a given metaphysics, a given vocabulary and grammar, a given historico-cultural setting; as such, it necessarily reflects the thematic constraints as well as the metaphorical and neologistic possibilities of that particular setting (Ricoeur 1981: 105-9). Given the emergence of phenomenology as an element in the history of Western philosophy, its categories and its characteristic moves could no doubt potentially be demonstrated to reflect numerous historically prior *muthoi*, Christian and non-Christian, despite its not being an explicit outgrowth of any such tradition. Phenomenological accounts—and these include accounts of its own method—must therefore be admitted to be thoroughly situated, non-absolute, in nature.

The Christian gospel, similarly, does not seek to present a metaphysics, an exhaustive account of things-in-being; rather, to be appropriated by the gospel is to stand in the light and so to be predisposed to responding truthfully to those things-in-being disclosed by the light. The gospel is also necessarily circumscribed in its expression by the linguistic and cultural resources available to it at any given time, and therefore must inevitably reflect a metaphysics whenever it is narrated. And, like phenomenology, the truth of the gospel is self-validating: *once understood, the gospel demands assent*. Against any naive fideism, faithfulness to the gospel does not represent a random guess at ‘which religion is true’, a grand religious lottery which awaits an eschatological prize-draw. As the light which already makes known all things-in-being, the gospel is itself already known, if not thematically recognised through explicit confession (John 1:9-10). Rather, precisely in the manner of the phenomenological method, its truth is already given in its understanding. To understand and yet to deny the gospel is simple perversity (John 9:35–41).

Extending Karl Rahner’s categories, therefore, we may speak of Socratic detachment as ‘anonymously Christian’, simply by virtue of reproducing the plot of the Christian gospel. In the same way that the gospel does not exhaustively specify *a priori* the content of truthful existence but rather narrates the conditions of being truthful, so also phenomenology does not seek to prescribe an inventory of beings and their relations but, at root, proffers a comportment the adoption of which facilitates the multiple possibilities of being truthful which are congruent with our ironically multiple identity.

The Christian *muthos* can indeed be viewed as an existentially more complete account of Socratic detachment. In the narratives of

passion and resurrection, we find a powerful symbol of the 'distanciation of self from self' which issues in the deepened appropriation of self by being, as in Ricoeur's account. The gospel proposes the death of Jesus as *the* paradigmatic instantiation of detachment in that it relates not merely to a suspension of an intellectual world-belief but to the suspension of the founding intentions of existence itself, including the very desire to live. As Lewis Ayres puts it, our 'preferring of *amor Dei*' provides a bulwark against the domination of any narratives which promote a '2D compression' of the richness of gifted existence (Ayres 1995: 31). Thus the Husserlian *epoche*, which Sokolowski relates to Socratic detachment, can be understood—from an explicitly theological viewpoint—as an existentially truncated version of Christianity's central narrative theme. Similarly Gerardus van der Leeuw, still one of the best known names in the 'phenomenology' of religion, spoke of this detachment as 'man's true vital activity, consisting in... standing aside and understanding what appears into view' (Van der Leeuw 1986: 676).

What, then, of the enterprise of theology? As the explicit, confessional practice of the *ethos* of detachment, it must be understood not as the projection of a pre-existing ontology onto inert being but as a themed facilitation of, and response to, the disclosure of being itself. Theology is properly an *invention*, in the older sense of both a *discovering* and a *creating* (Ricoeur 1978b: 306). To be is more than to simply narrate; in fact it is primordially to listen (e.g. Heidegger 1993a: 220), our intentions being always already founded upon an intentional plasticity or world-openness (e.g. Heidegger 1966). Our *response* is perhaps best named by van der Leeuw as *testimony*. And if in the course of this creative discovering we encounter other testimonies fashioned within other traditions, then being-truthful requires attention to the question of whether they thematise our Christian latencies in new and enriching ways. For only from this encounter can theology free itself from the merely conventional and authentically own its being as tradition (Gadamer 1989: 299), the locus for the appearing of new metaphors and the enrichment of older ones, the revealing of the irreducible tension in the copula: '[b]eing-as means being *and* not being' (Ricoeur 1978b: 306).

Distanciation then, no less than appropriation, issues in testimony—albeit a testimony which may not be explicitly confessional. It can also be discerned within the tradition of Christian orthodoxy as a moment of disorientation. For tension, unevenness, even to some degree contradiction are not just features of postlapsarian existence but also unavoidable features of the Christian theological



tradition and the Biblical witness. Far from being a single, univocal narrative, Christian theology has always been the vehicle for numerous voices. This is brought out very pertinently by Walter Brueggemann in his study of the Psalms (Brueggemann 1984). He notes the presence of three moments: orientation—where praise and thanksgiving provide an affirmative tone; disorientation—where lament and questioning dominate in producing a negative tone; and re-orientation, where the Psalmist comes through a period of doubt or depression to recover an affirmative outlook towards God. Importantly, Brueggemann notes that the re-orientated position consists in a significant modification of the original orientation by the experience of disorientation and does not consist in a simple recovery of the original state.

It would seem that the theological method advocated in *Theology and Social Theory* can only accommodate a significantly disorientative moment at the cost of foregoing much of its rhetorical force. This is so not least because the structure of orientation- disorientation- reorientation resembles rather closely the movement of the dialectic, particularly in its Hegelian form. Brueggemann's analysis is compelling nonetheless, precisely because it leaves the impression not of an alien, imported structuring, but rather of a 'phenomenological' reading which allows what was already present yet unnamed to appear and come into relief. It has the further value of highlighting the manner in which this structure is evident not only within the Psalter but can be identified more widely within the scriptures: for example, the Proverbs as a whole instance a moment of orientation; Ecclesiastes is strongly marked by disorientation. In short, the scriptures contain *muthoi* which are widely divergent in terms of the stories they tell; the need discerned by Irenaeus to supplement a fixed New Testament canon with a relatively well defined Rule of Faith shows that this is no new realisation (cf. e.g. Loughlin 1999: 50-1). This is not to argue that a single narrative cannot be constructed on the basis of the scriptures as a whole, but it is to acknowledge the role of the community of faith as guardian of the tradition of interpretation in composing this narrative and, crucially, to also draw attention to the many other voices which provide a sometimes discordant accompaniment to the lead vocal; again, the structure of hierarchical differentiation constitutive of the life-world is apparent here. In other words, the sources of Christian theology contain an inherent element of internal distancing which demands to be taken into account and wrestled with.

These latter reflections raise a further question: is narration, as Milbank consistently implies, the exclusive or normative means for articulating truth? As Ricoeur remarks, narrative is not the whole story

(Ricoeur 1988: 272); other *genres* also exist which can serve to give linguistic articulation to the mystery of existence. Texts as different as the poetic section of Job, Paul's letters and Revelation's apocalyptic are far from being straightforward narrations; to simply categorize them as 'narrative pauses', as Gerard Loughlin tentatively does in a footnote, scarcely does justice to their character (Loughlin 1999: 62, n.135). Might not a more illuminating account consider the diachronic dimension alongside the synchronic dimension in which the *structure* of the writing becomes a vital clue in its reading? But to note this is to pass on to the final section of this paper in which the implicit diachronism of Milbank's approach will be considered.

### **Synchrony regained**

The aim of this final section is to question Milbank's assumption that narration is the normative (exclusive?) manner in which truth may be said. Once again, his treatment of Ricoeur will provide the point of embarkation for this discussion, but the ensuing trajectory will require that some attention also be given to his treatment of an author whose programme has much in common with his, yet which is nonetheless not immune from Milbank's critique: George Lindbeck. To enter this final area of discussion, some expansion of the earlier treatment of explanation and understanding is needed.

Understanding may be defined as pertaining to the final causes, or purposes, of phenomena: the nature of such causes varies according to the noetic modes deployed, but understanding as such is always inherently diachronic; that is, it articulates a phenomenon as subordinate to, yet necessary for another, future phenomenon. Understanding may therefore be readily re-phrased in terms of narration, as required by Milbank (Milbank 1990: 267). The situation with explanation is more complicated, since the term has come to include within its aegis both efficient causation and structural analysis. The latter provides a stylized re-reading which issues in a synchronic 'map' having an atemporal character akin to Aristotle's category of formal cause. The former, as a diachronic process, could also be readily accommodated within a framework of narration (this is the example Milbank cites on pp. 266–7). Yet efficient causation may also be expressed synchronically by means of laws which abstract the general from the particular as the instantiation of certain paradigms. Milbank denies the legitimacy of this procedure since he is committed to the view that all accounts are essentially narrations (or re-narrations) and that it is impossible, on formal grounds alone, to attribute priority to the general over the particular. Yet it is a truism that an often pronounced

degree of commonality can be discerned between diverse particular narratives—e.g. an apple falling from a tree and the movements of the planets across the heavens—and that the ‘plot’ common to various narratives can further be expressed in summary form as a paradigmatic *schema*. How then are the *logoi* of the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic to be related?

The paradigmatic *logos* is characterised by atemporal law: the future is regarded as in essence the same as the past so that, once the essential elements of a situation are identified, the future can be specified, if not determinately, then at least according to a well-defined set of probabilities. By contrast, the syntagmatic *logos*—the *muthos*, or plot—does not prescribe a definite outcome to a sequence of events but rather delimits a region of authentic possibility on the basis of the foregoing, always such that an indefinite variety of outcomes may be envisaged. Paradigmatic *schemata* are therefore formally reductions of the syntagmatic. Thus, while it follows that to regard phenomena as merely instances of general laws is an entirely arbitrary and groundless move, paradigmatic analysis remains a valid strategy so long as its inherently reductive nature is recognised: it reflects the useful pretence that time is unreal. Since however temporality is a fundamental given of existence, a phenomenologically aware account of paradigmatic formulations must grant their validity with the qualification of ‘as if’. Once this is granted, we may freely admit that diverse narratives do suggest common story-lines, plots or diachronic *logoi* which can be expressed as synchronic ‘maps’ such as the laws of natural science. Such a map is available for but does not demand diachronic narrating—once (provisionally) understood, it may be grasped ‘all at once’ as a system of relations.

To explain, then, is to identify the instantiation of certain synchronic *schemata* under certain contingent circumstances. However this phenomenologically rich event, the separability of the *logos* of diachronic sequence, its suspension in synchronic form and potential re-animation through actual application, simply disappears in the wake of a doctrine of narrative’s exhaustive thematic sufficiency. By contrast Ricoeur, in his careful and sustained analysis of historiography, concludes that while history must ultimately be understood along the lines of a narrativist account, this understanding must include reference also to nomological explanation as witness to the self-transcendence of narrative (Ricoeur 1984). Gerard Loughlin also, in arguing against Rowan Williams’ case for an exclusively diachronic understanding of reading, validly points out that ‘any (diachronic) reading must consist, at least in part, of successive synchronies, some of which will remain

and some of which will give way to others' (Loughlin 1999: 137).

Indeed, that the synchronic cannot simply be dispensed with in favour of the diachronic is suggested by the phenomenology of time. Ricoeur, in his re-narrating of Augustine's meditations on time, shows how diachrony entails synchrony fundamentally because the present has an extended three-fold character as attention, memory and anticipation. Augustine's elaboration of this *distentio animi* reveals that memory and anticipation are equally 'modalities of the present' (Ricoeur 1984: 8). Even amid the unfolding diachrony of the story, the memory of what has passed and the anticipation of what lies ahead are also present thus constituting an irreducible synchrony.

Thus the *distentio animi* names a transcendence whereby synchrony is rooted in and entailed by primordial diachrony. The three-fold present accordingly constitutes a synchronic space which may be mapped in various ways according to various nomological schemes. These include, as already mentioned, the 'laws' of natural and social science, but also the 'Law' of righteous living before God. That thinking can become dominated by the synchronic is historically demonstrable, as abiding obedience to 'immutable' paradigms—doctrinal, ethical or scientific—makes plain. As MacIntyre has shown, legalism so understood is at odds with a virtue-based ethics which conceives law as secondary to an unfolding vision of the *telos* of existence (MacIntyre 1985: 168-70). MacIntyre's championing of virtue in this regard is homologous with Ricoeur's insistence on the dependence, though not the reducibility, of the nomological to the narrative.

This presentation has some bearing on Milbank's treatment of diachrony and synchrony as they feature in George Lindbeck's theological methodology. Lindbeck is taken to task for confusing the paradigmatic and syntagmatic: narratives, for Lindbeck, function as atemporal entities which modify cultural existence for those who inhabit them. As such, they are not modified by history, nor do they present any real challenge to prevailing cultural conditions. Milbank is surely correct inasmuch as Lindbeck does prematurely close the syntagmatic horizon, thereby treating Christian narratives as paradigms which can be straightforwardly applied 'off the peg'. He is also correct in noting that doctrinal formulations augment the content of the syntagmatic heritage, thereby developing the latter in the process. However, as Gerard Loughlin has observed, Milbank's overall approach is itself prone to fore-closing the syntagmatic horizon (Loughlin 1992: 379-80; cf. Ayres 1995: 28-31) and functioning in a paradigmatic manner which, while it is not slow in critiquing other narratives offers little obvious openness to external critique—as

argued above.

As well as supplementing the syntagmatic development of tradition, doctrine is surely better conceived as a paradigmatic 'snapshot' of tradition at a given historical moment: the mapping of diverse narrative diachronies onto a synchronic surface, the always provisional yet quite indispensable spatializing of existence's fundamental temporality. Assigning the quasi-closure required for decisive ethical action to doctrine in this manner releases pressure on the Christian narrative(s) to somehow fill this role. What is puzzling is that while he identifies this as a problem for Lindbeck, Milbank fails to discern the implicit presence of this same shortcoming in his own thesis. To quote Loughlin and to connect with observations concerning the plurivocity of Christian tradition made above:

Rather than the monopoly of a master-narrative, which positions all other narratives, one could suggest an ever-extending tradition of narrative linkages, in which now some stories, now others, function as the synchronic animators of the rest.

Loughlin 1992: 381

While the *muthos* of an as-yet-incomplete narrative must ever evade total capture within the potentially closed *logos* of a synchronic scheme, such schemes nonetheless facilitate historical being-Christian.

This task, of synthesising ever new paradigmatic *schemata* which themselves become sedimented as developments of the syntagmatic process which they aim to map synchronically, I wish to further identify as a *dialectical* task in a manner consistent with a reading of *The Republic*. Dialectic, which 'treats assumptions not as principles, but as... starting points and steps in the ascent to something which involves no assumptions' (Plato 1974: 314), may be freed from its Platonic (and later Hegelian) metaphysics by locating the 'first principle' towards which it aims at an eschatological terminus when God will terminate the mode of existence we currently take for granted and finally and definitively establish the radical newness of the Kingdom. This method, variously named by Plato as *noesis* and *episteme*, need not denote a presupposition-free method but rather the intentional plasticity of existence whereby one's current world-belief is always qualified by the possibility of transcendence.

Although he consistently opposes a Platonic dialectic with the category of narration, it could be argued that in some respects Milbank's approach in *Theology and Social Theory* almost reduces to what Plato calls *dianoia*, reasoning from first principles. The principles, once accepted, exhaustively contain the unfolding deductive narrative: there is

no need to look elsewhere to arrive at a solution—the *logos* intrinsic to the axioms is entirely sufficient. Likewise the rhetorical persuasiveness of each narrative cannot require supplementation from other narratives—their otherness can scarcely be countenanced in principle—and so each narrative has an overwhelmingly self-contained quality which entails a kind of mutual cultural solipsism. Such is the book's swashbuckling 'grand narrative', at least.

As has already been noted, however, certain 'epinarratives' within the book tell a different story, as does the pronouncedly pluralistic strain appearing in Milbank's subsequent writing. In chapter 6 of *The Word Made Strange*, 'The name of Jesus', he stresses that doctrinal and ethical developments are far from being simply deductive outworkings of basic belief. Rather the process is a 'formal becoming, a structured transformation'. Christianity is 'the constant repetition of a historically emergent practice which has no real point of origination, but only acquires identity and relative stability *through* this repetition' (Milbank 1997: 152). Such 'non-identical repetition' issues in a trajectory of diachronic mutation which cannot be predicted and thus holds out the possibility of embodying novelties not discernible at earlier stages, novelties which moreover may be the result of exposure to influences alien to historically prior Christian tradition.

These caveats appreciably reduce the distance between Milbank and the position adopted in this paper. The latter proposes, in effect, the recovery of Platonic *episteme*, understood as a theologico-ethical comportment rather than a methodological device. Such a comportment is of course none other than the Socratic detachment already mentioned, a condition in which one's belonging to one's tradition is not compromised but rather enhanced through the temporarily distancing encounter with the religious other. Unlike Milbank's method, this clearly shows how a theology can remain open to critique and thus remain a genuinely unfinished story which resists the premature substitution of the paradigmatic for the syntagmatic.

Nor, on this account, need dialectics compromise the vision of primordial peace which Milbank communicates so infectiously. Instead it can be read as an ethic of successive self-distancing which is ultimately not other than the *logos* of the narrative of tradition itself. *Pace* Milbank again, the *agon* can and should be rehabilitated, not only as a means of countering falsehood in a postlapsarian context as Nicholas Lash urges (Lash 1992: 360), but more fundamentally as a recognition of the radical otherness of that which issues from non-identical repetition: yet *another*, in which the truth disclosed in all prior positions is acknowledged and reflected. Only thus can Milbank's

highly idealised account of ecclesial existence be earthed in a historical context in which the Body of Christ has become divided into several thousand institutional pieces. Gillian Rose is again helpful here.

[T]he difficulty with reason, theoretical and practical (ethical), lies not in its initial, abstract universality; the difficulty of reason rests on whether the initial, abstract universal (the meaning or idea) *comes to learn*: whether *something can happen to it*; whether... one abstractly universal individual enters into substantial interaction with another abstractly universal individual.

Rose 1993: 8

The reflection issuing from such an encounter constitutes 'speculative' knowledge in the earlier sense of the word discussed by Gadamer (1989: 465–75). And if the Hegelian dialectic is to be scented here, then this will not be denied; Hegel cannot perhaps—as Milbank admits—be so easily dispensed with. But it is also a recognition that that of which theology treats, although it is reliant on theology for its naming to each new generation, is always and ever more than theology itself; and that, as 'the light that enlightens all people', can feature—however incidentally—in other narratives too, thus confronting the community which is singularly charged with bearing its name.

### **Concluding remarks**

Milbank speaks of two voices being brought together in *Theology and Social Theory*—the MacIntyrean voice and the nihilist voice (Milbank 1990: 5). I have tried to show in this paper that his attempt to 'radicalize' Alasdair MacIntyre's theses is problematic at the very point where radicalization is attempted—the overthrowing of dialectic and argumentation in favour of narrative and persuasion. It is precisely the all-sufficiency of narrative as a category which I have sought to bring into question here by examining the notion of distanciation as it features in the work of Paul Ricoeur. Distanciation brings into relief important differences between various ways of knowing, exhibits the plurality and legitimate availability of narrative identities, and affirms the possibility of a qualified suspension of the temporality of existence in paradigmatic forms of knowledge.

The exact implications of all this for Milbank's critique of MacIntyre would require another paper. In particular, the link which MacIntyre makes between inter-traditional rationality and multilinguality requires close attention (MacIntyre 1988: 349–88). Nevertheless the makings of a response have already been set out: dialectic, the Platonic *noesis* or *episteme*, must be retained alongside,

though ultimately subordinate to, narrative, in order that the unilinearity of narrative be corrected through exposure to other truths which lie 'off the beaten track'. The transcendence of language by being always means that we have still yet to hear the *whole* story.

*I would like to acknowledge comments made by Dr Gavin D'Costa on earlier drafts of this paper.*

- 1 Lack of space precludes adequate discussion of Ricoeur's further elaboration of this theme given in his Gifford Lectures published as *Oneself as Another* (Ricoeur 1992).
- 2 Gerard Loughlin offers a valuable summary of aspects of the work of Gérard Genette, which includes an account of how a single 'story' may embrace multiple 'narratives'. The relationship between what I have termed here the metanarrative of the root self and its various epi- or para-narratives could be usefully explored with reference to Genette's work (see Loughlin 1999: 52–63).

## References

- Ayres, L., 1995, 'Representation, theology and faith' in *Rethinking Metaphysics*, eds L.G. Jones & S.E. Fowl, pp. 23–46. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Brueggeman, W., 1984, *The Message of the Psalms*. Minneapolis: Augsburg.
- Daniels, J., 1997, 'Religion, religious studies and the life-world', *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* 18: 35–50.
- Dilthey, W., 1979, *Dilthey: Selected Writings*, trans. & ed. H.P. Rickman. Cambridge: University Press.
- Gadamer, H.-G., 1989, *Truth and Method*, trans. J. Weinsheimer & D.G. Marshall. London: Sheed & Ward.
- Heidegger, M., 1962, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Heidegger, M., 1966, 'Conversation on a country path about thinking' in *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. J.M. Anderson & E.H. Freund, pp. 58–90. New York: Harper & Row.
- Heidegger, M., 1993a, 'Letter on humanism' in *Basic Writings*, ed. D. Farrell Krell, pp. 217–65. London: Routledge.
- Heidegger, M., 1993b, 'On the essence of truth' in *Basic Writings*, ed. D. Farrell Krell, pp. 115–38. London: Routledge.
- Keppnes, S.D., 1986, 'Bridging the gap between understanding and explanation approaches to the study of religion', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 25: 504–12.
- Lash, N., 1992, 'Not exactly politics or power', *Modern Theology* 8: 354–64
- Leeuw, G. van der, 1986, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans. J.E. Turner. Princeton: University Press.



- Loughlin, G.,** 1992, 'Christianity at the end of the story or the return of the master narrative', *Modern Theology* 8: 365–84.
- Loughlin, G.,** 1999, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Lyon, D.,** 1992, 'Against secular reason: Milbank on Augustine and post-modernism', *Crux* 28: 42–5.
- MacIntyre, A.,** 1985, *After Virtue*. London: Duckworth.
- MacIntyre, A.,** 1988, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* London: Duckworth
- Milbank, J.,** 1990, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Milbank, J.,** 1997, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Plato,** 1974, *The Republic*, trans. H.D.P. Lee. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Ricoeur, P.,** 1971, 'The model of the text: meaningful action considered as text', *Social Research* 38: 529-563.
- Ricoeur, P.,** 1978a, 'The hermeneutical function of distanciation' in *Exegesis*, eds G. Antoine et al, pp. 297-319. Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press.
- Ricoeur, P.,** 1978b, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. R. Czerny. London: Routledge
- Ricoeur, P.,** 1981, 'Phenomenology and hermeneutics' in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, trans. J.B. Thomson, pp. 101-28. Cambridge: University Press.
- Ricoeur, P.,** 1984, *Time and Narrative, Vol. I*, trans. K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer. London: Chicago University Press.
- Ricoeur, P.,** 1988, *Time and Narrative, Vol. III*, trans. K. Blamey & D. Pellauer. London: Chicago University Press.
- Ricoeur, P.,** 1992, *Oneself as Another*, trans. K. Blamey. London: Chicago University Press.
- Roberts, R.H.,** 1993, 'Transcendental sociology? A critique of John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46: 523–35.
- Rose, G.,** 1993, *Judaism and Modernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Schutz, A.,** 1962a, 'On multiple realities' in *Collected Papers I: the Problem of Social Reality*, pp. 207–59. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Schutz, A.,** 1962b, 'Symbol reality and society' in *Collected Papers I: the Problem of Social Reality*, pp. 287-356. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Schutz, A.,** 1975, 'Some structures of the life-world' in *Collected Papers III: Studies in Phenomenological Philosophy*, pp. 116-32. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Segal, R.A.,** 1990, 'Misconceptions of the social sciences', *Zygon* 25: 263–78.
- Sokolowski, R.,** 1974, *Husserlian Meditations*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.