

and religion requires precisely the trauma of God's manifestation in the body of an individual maximally devoid of sacrality and significance within the Roman system - thus in the corpse of a man suffering a slave's death at the hands of imperial authority as well as at the instigation of his own traditional religious authorities.

- 5 J.Derrida, *D'un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie*, Paris 1983; ET in *Semeia. An Experimental Journal for Biblical Criticism* 23 (1982), pp. 62-97. from the text as given at a conference in 1980.
- 6 See especially some articles published in *Libres Propos*, May and August 1929; some very good discussion of the issue in Peter Winch's book, *Simone Weil. "The Just Balance"*, Cambridge 1989, chs.5-9, 11, and c.f. the present writer's review article on Winch's book, *Philosophical Investigations* 14.2 (1991), pp.155-171, especially 158ff.
- 7 *Faces of Jesus. Latin American Christologies*, ed. J.M. Bonina, Maryknoll, NY, 1984 (the Spanish original appeared in 1977).
- 8 "'Between purgation and illumination": a critique of the theology of right', in K.Surin, ed. *Christ, Ethics and Tragedy. Essays in Honour of Donald MacKinnon*, Cambridge 1989, pp.161-196, especially 183-192.

‘Non tali auxilio’: John Milbank’s Suasion to Orthodoxy

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I finished this breath-taking book lost in admiration for the breadth of intellectual culture that lies behind it; for its situating of different enquiries—theological, philosophical, sociological—in illuminating inter-relation; for the masterly way in which it weaves together negative analysis and positive proposal so as to commend Christian faith as the only world-view, and recipe for social living, truly worth having. That a British author, writing at the end of the twentieth century, could take on, in profoundly informed fashion, every major proponent of autonomous thought and religiously emancipated social action (‘secular reason’), from the Athenian enlightenment to the Parisian *nouveaux philosophes*, all with a view to showing the inadequacy—not simply *de facto* but *de jure*—of their projects, and, correlatively the sole adequacy of a religious, and more specifically a Christian, alternative in both theory and practice; this is, evidently, a publishing event of considerable magnitude. Moreover, the subtlety and sophistication of Milbank’s

criticisms of a range of secular constructs for both thought and social action so broad as to include virtually the entire contemporary intelligentsia of Western Europe and North America, will require a response of equal incisiveness from the inhabitants of these systems, and, as such, makes his book an event in intellectual history as well. That his critique of secular rationality in its various guises is mounted in the name of Christian *orthodoxy* and Catholic *tradition* can, it seems, only gladden the heart of a Catholic believer, a priest, a Dominican. . . In the hour of Catholic Christianity's desperate intellectual need (a glance at the pages of the *Times Literary Supplement* is enough to show the disappearance of Christian orthodoxy, as a source of meaning and truth, from high culture in Britain), God has, apparently, visited his people.

'It seems', 'apparently'. . . My second, and equally strong, reaction was a shudder of aversion. *Non tali auxilio*: 'not by such help' is Christian, and especially Catholic, faith to be recommended. Despite the numerous true judgments, good maxims and beautiful insights to be found scattered through this book, its overall message is deplorable. My objections can be summed up in two words: 'hermeticism' and 'theocracy'.

By 'hermeticism' I mean the enclosure of Christian discourse and practice within a wholly separate universe of thought and action, a universe constituted by the prior 'mythos' of Christianity—that is (I take it, the word is never explained) an overarching, supra-rational, vision of the world, within which alone particular truths can be set forth, particular exemplars of action set up for imitation. For Milbank there can be no such thing as an intellectual indebtedness of the Church to natural wisdom. Every putative form of such wisdom as can be named is not only extraneous to the Christian *mythos*, and without a role in the dramatic narrative, from Genesis to Apocalypse, in which that *mythos* is expressed. Also, all natural wisdom is legitimately liable to deconstruction. Its own story of interpretation is poised unhappily between the pre-Socratic Heraclitus, with his view of Being as flux, and the contemporary French post-modernists, with their anarchic nihilism, and at no point can the history of its degeneration be halted, so as to provide the play of signifying that is human language and culture with a stable foundation. Only supernatural revelation, itself equally 'unfounded', yet, as *super*-natural, invulnerable to such attack, can reliably disclose what Christian Scholasticism has called the transcendentals—the beautiful, the good, the true—in their interconnected unity. Otherwise there is (literally) nothing. No common ground exists, therefore, between natural wisdom either in its

philosophical form or (presumably, this goes undiscussed by Milbank) such non-philosophical forms as the other world-religions, their rites, beliefs, norms for action, literature and art. At best, from *within* the Christian *mythos* and narrative we can reclaim fragments of another tradition, such as that of the Greek *polis*, in the way that Christian exegetes have allegorically exploited the Hebrew Bible as the Church's 'Old Testament'. There can be no *argument* to the truth of Christianity from shared premises with non-Christians, for no such premises exist. There can only be *persuasion* to accept the Gospel, whether negatively, by showing up the vacuousness of the (Western) alternatives, or positively, by evoking its beauty. 'Dialectics', discourse based on reason, is to be replaced by 'rhetoric', that is, in the last analysis, an appeal to taste.

It is no use my protesting that such an ordinance is inhuman, or at least anti-humane, for Milbank recognises no shared 'human nature' to which appeal might be made, but only the endlessly different outcomes, whether good or evil, of the action of a creature whose single *proprium* it is to be a (finite, though open-ended) creator. What counts as the authentically human—for Milbank, the *charitable*—can only be identified within the Church, indeed only exists there. But I can at least protest in the name of ecclesial tradition, which he does accept. The Catholic theologians on whom he relies above all, Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar, with, behind them the seminal philosophical figure of Maurice Blondel—though concerned, as he rightly says, to 'supernaturalize the natural'—did not suppose that they were thereby *eliding* the natural, rubbing it out on the Church's map of the world. It is an incorrect interpretation of De Lubac's thought to say that, by insisting on the essentially supernatural orientation of human nature, and denying the existence of two parallel sets of ends for that nature in the concrete order, he rejected any formal distinction of nature from the supernatural. Though Balthasar may move at times perilously close to such an erasure of the natural (and so of natural wisdom, and natural law), owing to the centring of his theology in the incarnate, not the pre-existent Logos 'by whom all things were made', the literary practice of both men as historical theologians shows that they were far from denying a relative autonomy to the expression of the transcendentals found outside the Judaeo-Christian order. One need only think of De Lubac's account of the Renaissance scholar Pico della Mirandola, with his love of the *pia quaedam theologia* of the antique sages, and the fourth volume of Balthasar's *Herrlichkeit*, on 'the realm of metaphysics in antiquity'. Or, taking a longer view, we can think of Justin Martyr's encomium of certain Greek philosophers as men who

lived with the Logos, an early testimony to an appropriation of ancient philosophy by Christian thinkers more intimate and constitutive than Milbank cares to admit. Its justification lies precisely in the doctrine of creation, as the making of one world for all human beings, a commonwealth founded on God's primordial self-disclosure in the creative act. Nor was this simply a matter of the initiatives of individuals, for the utilisation of the patrimony of ancient thought by the great conciliar definitions of faith (first, in the patristic period, in Trinitarian theology and Christology, and then, in the middle ages, for sacramental theology and theological anthropology) amounts to the ecclesial ratification of this *démarche*, a ratification that privileges, as it happens, just those features of the ancient conceptual vocabulary—substance, person, presence, soul—which Milbank finds most problematic. Analogously, individual exegetes, in drawing on the Hebrew Bible not only allegorically but also typologically thanks to the conviction, found in the 'rule of faith', of the unity of the two Covenants, and the consequent non-desuetude, though surpassedness of the First—witnessed to the distinct value of the pre-Christian Jewish tradition as an expression of God's saving purpose, and did not simply treat it as a source of illustration for the Second. Here again, the Church sanctioned the claim (already anticipated in the canonical New Testament itself) that the Christian tradition internally incorporated—and did not merely externally exploit—that of Judaism by transposing such typological exegesis into her liturgical prayer where *lex orandi* equals *lex credendi*. Although it is important to draw attention to the way in which the Gospel innovated on the conceptual world of antiquity in the conciliar definitions, where the key terms to which Milbank objects undergo a sea-change thanks to their pressing into the service of a triune, christocentric, eucharistic, resurrection-oriented faith, as also to the transcendence of the Gospel in its active fulfilling of the Torah, nonetheless it is imperative as well to keep open the commerce of the Church's doctrine with more universal structures of reason as with the faith of Israel. And notably, in posing the question of God, Milbank cannot do justice to the affirmation found in the 'Catholic reading' of Scripture (especially the Wisdom literature and the Letter to the Romans) at the First Vatican Council that the divine existence is naturally knowable by human reason; like Hans Küng in *Does God Exist?* he could only maintain that, at any rate, trusting oneself to an ultimate mothering reality is the sole alternative to Nietzsche's nihilism.

Before moving on to my second objection to *Theology and Social Theory*—namely, its espousal of theocracy, let me raise the query suggested by the above criticism: What Church *is* this to which Milbank

makes appeal? For Milbank the Church is not only, as already seen, the teller of the Christian narrative, and thus the transparency of humanity to the uniquely valid *mythos* of Christianity. She is also (and for this reason) the key to all proper social co-existence, the only possible bearer of human community, the *altera civitas* or 'alternative City' in whose peace alone the otherwise ineliminable conflicts of the human *polis* are assuaged. In his programme, all sociology is to be replaced by ecclesiology, just as all philosophy is to be replaced by the doctrine of the Trinity. But granted that, as he tells us, the Church he is describing is not some ideal Church (that would be to fall victim to those sins of illicit reification and misplaced abstraction which count high on his list of intellectual evils), then which of the historic churches must bear the weight of saving truth and redeeming action which he would offload? 'Protestantism', usually diminished with a minuscule initial letter, is treated derisively throughout, not least for spawning the individualism, liberalism and secularism celebrated in the 'Whig' interpretation of history. Milbank protests the 'Catholic' (exalted in majuscule) character of his faith, ethics, exegesis. There are, accordingly, three main contenders: (Eastern) Orthodoxy; (Roman) Catholicism; Anglo-Catholicism. Despite occasional passing references to such Greek fathers as Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor, Milbank betrays little understanding of, or sympathy for, the Orthodox East. Speaking of the pastoral role of the emperor in the unified Christendom society of Charlemagne, he dismisses the corresponding Byzantine practice as beneath attention since at Constantinople the Church was but a department of the State. Such a description might serve for the Church of Russia in the period between Peter the Great and the Revolution of 1917, but it hardly fits Byzantium where, though no single model of relationship pertained, the notion of *symphonia* of emperor and patriarch predominated. So far as the (Roman) Catholic Church is concerned, there are insuperable obstacles to any reconciling of Milbank's theology with the doctrine of the Church of Rome. Not only is it hard to see how his 'counter-ontology' can be squared with the conciliar pronouncements of the first six ecumenical Councils (Nicaea I to Constantinople III), with the Council of Vienne on the soul-body relationship, with Lateran IV and Trent on the holy Eucharist. His outright rejection of a non-ecclesial rationality and morals (natural wisdom, natural law) also go against (Roman) Catholicism's grain, as visible not only in conciliar monuments of Tradition but also in a wider practice. His remarks on the papal claim to a 'plenitude of power', founded on the dominical promise (and command) to Peter, with their echo of the pervasive anti-Romanism of non-Anglo-Papalist Anglo-

Catholicism suggests what local enquiry confirms. Milbank's Church is Anglicanism—which is to say, in effect, the Church of England, together with its diaspora, and assorted appurtenances, abroad. The difficulties which must surely be involved in getting members of the *Church of England* at large to accept Milbank's thesis, and to act, in respect of English society, as though it were true, must to some degree call into question his credibility as a commentator on the politically possible.

What Milbank desires indeed—and here I come to my second (and closing) theme, that of 'theocracy', is the restoration of the Tudor polity in England, shorn of those monarchical, aristocratic and proto-bourgeois features which militated against its (as it were) 'socialist' character. His ideal (the term must, *malgré lui*, with the discovery of his Anglicanism, be reinstated), as his section on Church-State relations indicates, is Richard Hooker's *respublica christiana*, at once, and, in the concrete, inseparably, Church and civil society, the English people in their twin offices as temporality and spirituality—the second, evidently, prior to and summoned to transfigure the first. Garnering a harvest cut from a great swathe of intellectual history, from the Greek tragedians on the conflicting allegiances of city and household, law and loyalty, to the post-Nietzschean, post-Freudian French analysts of desire and the will-to-power, Milbank concludes that the city of the State, the secular city, *the civic itself* is irredeemably given over to violence, whether overt or covert, and incapable of either formulating or, more vital still, granting effectively to itself the conditions of a social peace. Nothing remains but for the secular to yield, not as theoretical reason only but also as practical reason—the justice of the State, and to allow the Church to fill the vacuum which, in reality as distinct from the façades and stratagems of power, civil society already is. Only the Christian *mythos*, the Christian narrative the Christian (ecclesial) community, can secure the human good—the beautiful pattern of living—which always eludes the secular ruler's grasp. Milbank's social programme is not 'theocratic' in the sense of necessarily requiring the apostolic ministry to be the guardians of the State (there is in his book, for a 'Catholic' writer, remarkably little treatment of the role of the ordained). But it is theocratic in that, on the one hand, it seeks to restore Christendom (*Theology and Social Theory* is dedicated to 'the Remnant of Christendom') and on the other it systematically writes out of the social script all clauses—based on natural law, human rights, or whatever—which would safeguard in a Christendom society the protected place which, in conscience, unbelievers, and those of other faiths, should be accorded. In adopting his hermeticism, Milbank has left himself no

language—other than that of charity, with its indefinitely flexible creative constitution of its own ethos—in which the distinct place of these ‘others’ could be articulated, and his theocracy, accordingly, mitigated. Were all members of the Church saints, such a régime of charity might suffice. But as the history of the Church, that mingled story of grace and sin, indicates, charity is not enough. Nor can the Church, as the non-plenary extension of the Incarnation (she is the body, not the Head!) and the only partial manifestation of Pentecost (the Spirit is her soul, not her hypostasis!) legitimately claim to *absorb* the world by her Christic and Pneumatic energies. A remainder is left, a realm for the play of the *free will* of God’s creatures, though this be not yet the eschatological *freedom* of the children of God. The Church ‘pro-exists’ for all humanity; but in the meanwhile, before her mission is divinely completed, she must ‘co-exist’ with other aggregates of the human members of the creation.

I want, however, to conclude this article by saying—the reader may think paradoxically—that *Theology and Social Theory* represents in its broad lines, and despite my criticisms, the *general direction* in which (Roman) Catholic Christianity should move. Both in its high doctrine of the supernatural and of ‘special’ revelation, and in its willingness to entertain the recreation of a Christendom society, where the secular is transformed into a culture penetrated by that revelation, in the service of that (sole, concrete) supernatural end of man, Milbank’s book points the right way. It restores the guts to a Christianity often eviscerated by unhappy marriages with predatory ideologies—whether they take the strong form of such positive philosophies as Marxism, or the weak one of a negative counterpart like liberalism. Unfortunately, Milbank goes too far: in attempting to persuade to the faith of the Great Church he damages it, and not with some slight scar but a grave wound. Hence I respond to his suasion to orthodoxy: *non tali auxilio*.