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THE SECULAR AND THE SACRED IN THE THINKING OF JOHN MILBANK:
A CRITICAL EVALUATION

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Abstract: This article examines John Milbank's deconstruction of secular social theory, and the counter master narrative that he proposes. Milbank depicts secular social theory as based on an ontology of 'violence'. Instead, he proposes a participatory Christian master narrative based on an ontology of peace. Two questions are posed in this article. First, is Milbank's description of secular thought as undergirded by an ontology of violence valid? Second, does the Christian counter narrative that he proposes provide an adequate and viable social theory? After explicating Milbank's analysis of secular social theory and his alternative of an ontology of peace, the article comes to the conclusion that Milbank's analysis of secular theory is seriously flawed because of the very comprehensive and universal content that he gives to the term 'violence'. His alternative social theory is also not viable because of the ecclesiocentric nature of his model. It is argued that Milbank's alternative narrative displays contradictions and does not escape theocratic, relativist and 'violent' elements.

Key Words: John Milbank, Ontology, Social theory, Secular, Narrative, Violence, Peace, Participation, Gift, Church.

Introduction

“Once there was no secular” is the provocative opening sentence of the first chapter in John Milbank’s classical book *Theology and Social theory*. This statement encapsulates in a nutshell Milbank’s theological project. He regards the idea of an autonomous secular sphere as a ‘fiction’ that has colonized philosophy and theology all too long.¹ According to Milbank the secular is not a neutral domain as it proclaims itself to be, but is a ‘disguised heterodoxy of various stripes, a revived paganism and a religious nihilism’.² Underlying secular thought is an ontology of ‘violence’, that is, a reading of the world that assumes the priority of force and which tells how this force is best managed and confined by counter-force.³ This inherent violent ontology perpetuates difference, which ultimately leads to nihilism. In order to escape nihilism, Milbank contends that theology must be reclaimed as the master discourse for the whole of life, because theology alone remains the discourse of non-mastery.⁴ Contrary to secular discourse, the authentic Christian meta-narrative, as developed in the Augustinian, semi-Aristotelian and Thomistic tradition, is undergirded by an ontology of peace that recognizes no original violence. It construes the infinite not as chaos, but as a harmonic peace that is beyond the circumscribing power of any totalizing reason.⁵ From the outset it pursues a universalism that tries to subsume rather than abolish difference.⁶

This article critically examines Milbank’s deconstruction of secular thought and the alternative Christian counter-narrative that he proposes. Two main questions are addressed: First, is Milbank’s description of secular thought as undergirded by an ontology of violence valid? Second, does the Christian counter-narrative that he proposes provide an adequate and viable social theory? The first section of this article will explicate and analyze Milbank’s deconstruction of secular thought as based on an ontology of ‘violence’, while the second section will discuss Milbank’s alternative Christian master discourse. The third section will return to the two questions posed. It will argue that Milbank’s definition of ‘violence’ is fundamentally flawed, which means that his deconstruction of secular thought in turn displays serious shortcomings. Secondly, his participational Christian model is neither adequate nor viable in a modern society, because it overextends theological claims and does not escape fideistic, theocratic, relativist, nor ‘violent’ tendencies.

Secular Social Theory’s Ontology Of Violence

Milbank’s fundamental premise is that all scientific social theories are themselves theologies in disguise based on an ontology of ‘violence’. He regards the date of 1300 as the turning point in modern human

thought. Around this date the traditional centrality of the doctrine of metaphysical participation and the unity between Scripture, tradition and reason in theology was abruptly challenged. A greater gap between specialists and non-specialists in all fields originated; administration became more technical; republican/ecclesial civic participation within the Italian states collapsed; clerical control over laity increased; sharper differentiations between academic disciplines were made and theology assumed a much more technical character.⁷ Milbank traces these developments to the origination of an univocalist ontology that involved an unmediated dualistic split between the finite and infinite. He attributes the rise of univocalist ontology specifically to Duns Scotus, who consummated certain tendencies that preceded him. According to Milbank, Scotus connected the ideas of the univocality of being and knowledge as representation and thus gave momentum to the notion that theoretical knowledge is complete when it is merely of known finite things taken without reference to their infinite creative source. Hence, in knowing finite existence we fully know being and truth as such. On the other hand, the infinite was portrayed by Scotus as self-sufficient, since it is the primary property of the divine.⁸ The chasm between human beings and God can, consequently, only be breached by the divine will, because knowledge is always circumscribed by finite epistemological boundaries. Scotus thus infinitized ethical understanding and finitized theoretical understanding.⁹

Scotus's voluntarist premise implies that God is no longer tied to creation by a deterministic and hierarchic form of causation as in the Neo-Platonic/Thomist tradition, but related to it by volition, since God is defined by Scotus as absolutely free-willed. This radical distinction between God and creation departed with the Thomist notion of *analogia entis*, which entailed that finite things participate analogically in God, because they derive their causality from God. Each thing possesses fully its own being and does not borrow its existence from a supreme *esse*. This leads, according to Milbank, to the separation of faith and philosophy and ultimately to a theology that encourages the emergence of independent intellectual economies, because mediation between reason and faith is no longer needed.¹⁰ The cosmos is now seen as finite, self-explicative and ruled by an inscrutable and supra-rationalist voluntarist God.¹¹ Reason becomes firmly bound within finitude, while philosophy is seen as an autonomous discipline no longer oriented towards the service of revelation.¹²

Milbank relates the unmediated dualist thinking of Scotus to Protestantism on the one hand and, conversely, to secular thought's belief in the neutral progress of reason that arose from the decline of theology. Protestant theology, according to Milbank, maintained a radical distinction between God and creation and abandoned participation in

divine being for a 'covenantal bond'.¹³ The result is that a juxtaposition is created between reason and faith. Milbank sees Protestant theology as based on a model of 'distance' that thinks of God as being at an infinite and unbridgeable range from our finitude. God can only be known through the imposition of the divine will, which proclaims itself and requires faith.¹⁴ Through its emphasis on free-will, absolute sovereignty, absolute ownership, contractual relationships between people and unmediated grace in a creational ontological sense, Protestantism contributed to the construction of a space for secular knowledge.¹⁵ Something can, after all, not be a finite and infinite reality at the same time.

The autonomous metaphysics of the Enlightenment is, according to Milbank, equally determined by a radical distinction between finite and infinite. For Descartes theoretical knowledge is on the one hand finitely confined to the *cogito*, or immediacy of self-awareness in all we think and do. Everything else we must doubt. On the other hand it also includes a certainty of the infinite as positively 'clear and distinct', and in light of this we are able to remove our doubts about the existence and nature of the world around us.¹⁶ Kant equally confines theoretical knowledge to appearances, and yet one has an ethical access to the infinite that cancels this metaphysical agnosticism, because the divine and religious are absolutely identified with the ethical imperative that we can comprehend.¹⁷ He effectively derives theoretical understanding and phenomenal reality from ethical understanding and noumenal reality.¹⁸ Kant, apparently the inventor of an autonomous human morality, in fact perpetuates Scotist divine command theory in the ethical realm. Since all moral value, according to Kant, is deducible from the factual reality of unconstrained free will, and yet we cannot be sure of possessing such a thing, it follows that the very possibility of the ethical flows from the imposition of the divine will.¹⁹ Milbank is of the view that Kant wants to resist a speculative metaphysics, but he is only able to do this on the basis of a metaphysical move that turns out to be irreconcilable with the outcome of his research. He thus relinquishes the whole dynamic between the finite and infinite.²⁰

One might ask why Milbank would associate Protestant theology and the metaphysical philosophies of the Enlightenment with 'violence'. It appears as if Milbank regards the notion of a God that imposes his will from outside the human subject and creation as a 'violent' concept. He equates imposition, even divine imposition, with violence. His counter-narrative therefore emphasizes that God does not reveal himself from outside the human being, but in the intrinsic poetic activity of the human subject. In fact, it seems as if Milbank regards the notions of autonomy, sovereignty and contractual relations as inherently 'violent', because all of these concepts make use of distinctions between a *subject* and *object*, an *I*

and *thou*, a *self* and an *other*. By setting these categories up against each other, a process of violence and counter-violence is allowed to unfold.

This understanding of 'violence' becomes particularly clear in Milbank's criticism of political liberalism and neo-liberalism. In his book *Theology and Social Theory* Milbank asserts that political liberalism is based on a certain kind of social theodicy.²¹ In a more recent article, *Liberalism and liberality*, he elaborates on this by stating that liberalism begins with a disguised naturalization of original sin as original egotism. Liberalism assumes that all human beings nurture their own 'egotism', but also need protection against the 'egotism' of others.²² The notion of a social contract is therefore constructed in order to manage the competing wills in a society by investing all political rule in a single sovereign will. Underlying this premise is the ontological primacy of evil and violence that assumes that human societies are inherently disharmonious and in constant fear of threat and therefore in a permanent 'semi-suspended warfare of plural co-existence'. However, Milbank proposes that a contract can never be the thing that fundamentally brings people together, nor can it represent the highest ideal of a true distributive justice.²³ This is exemplified by the fact that democratic societies degenerate into societies where majority opinion, not truth, determines outcomes. Consequently, the manipulation of opinion will carry the day. Usually the manipulation of fear is more effective than the manipulation of promise.²⁴

Milbank's criticism of neo-liberalism follows the same line of reasoning. Neo-liberalism is inherently seen as a form of immanent reasoning that celebrates the *libido dominandi*.²⁵ Self-interest and individualism are combined in such a way that it results in a new 'theodicy'. Market economics becomes a form of 'divine ordering' of chaos that results in an overall harmony. The 'hidden hand' of the market is seen as holding the initiative throughout history, while processes of production and exchange bring to light the design of nature.²⁶ Again, for Milbank the violent nature of neo-liberalism lies in its absolutization of self-interest and competing wills that can only lead to a culture of dominion, the abandonment of losers and subordination of rivals.

According to Milbank, positivism arose in the nineteenth century from the same intellectual background as liberalism. Whereas liberalism sought to uphold a collective sense through the individual exercise of virtue, positivism sought to identify a social system that preceded any politics; a set of social facts and laws prior to virtue.²⁷ It describes the social as a positive *datum* and explains other human phenomena in relation to this general facticity. The moral relationship of the individual to the collective order is declared to be a positive one: from the given 'social order' with its implied collective purposes, the individual derives his own goals and values.²⁸ Milbank states that sociology emerged within

the ambit of positivism and is deeply permeated by it. Sociologists such as Comte, Durkheim and Weber all viewed society as a product of nature and therefore reduced and redefined all religious phenomena in terms of the social.²⁹ They commenced a science from the perspective of a social whole and thus created a dualistic split between the social and individual. Inherent to sociological theory is the association of the social with permanent categories; a dualistic conception of humanity as caught between real nature and spiritual values; an identification of religion with irrational forces that are inexplicable; the importance given to functional causality; an empiricist attitude to facts; and a historicist narrative.³⁰ Milbank contends that although sociological theories masquerade as objective discourses of fact they are none the less forms of metaphysics with the hidden agenda to domesticate the sacred by translating it into the secular.³¹ For Milbank the 'violent nature of sociology is embedded in the fact that it attempts to relate the individual to the universal by mediating the unlimited sovereignty of the State with the self-will of the individual. The premise is that different value spheres are incommensurable, that religion must be kept on the margin and that social practices are defined by power relationships. Sociology, hence, does not escape a first principle commitment to a view of the world in which difference naturally leads to a forceful conflict that can only be contained by some form of counter-force.'³²

Since Milbank displays affinity for dialectical thinking one would venture that he will not accuse Hegel and Marx of the same kind of errors as liberalism and positivism. However, he does not think that their dialectics escape an ontology of 'violence'. According to Milbank Hegel is guilty of three philosophical errors. First, he retains the Cartesian subject because he still presupposes that a separation between a 'spiritual' sphere and a sphere of 'material cultural' expression, though contradictory, is real and ultimately belongs to the way things are.³³ Secondly, Hegel invents a 'myth of negation' in the sense that difference necessarily implies contradiction, rather than proceeding from analysis or the unfolding of a series. The result is the fiction of the polarity between subject and object. One can relate them only in terms of opposition, and can only derive a separate object from an all-sufficient subject by way of denial.³⁴ Hegel's third mistake, according to Milbank, is to misconstrue the infinite by placing finite and infinite in a relation of opposition, sublimated as identity. For Hegel, infinity is really nothing other than finitude itself taken as present reality, fully subsistent, and not dependent on anything else. He thus conceives of the infinite only in terms of presence.³⁵ The result is that he ends up refusing a fully Christian doctrine of creation in favour of a reversion to the 'violent' ontology of 'inhibition of chaos' which is displayed in his conception of creation as a negation that results in alienation, and so as itself a 'fall', both for God and

for humanity. He consequently makes evil a necessity for the development of finite subjectivity and for the emergence of virtue.³⁶

Following Hegel, Marx attempted to give a critique of political economy and modern political science, both of which help to define and construct secular power and authority.³⁷ In his analysis of capitalism Marx exposes the logic of capitalism as a secular logic.³⁸ He is also able to demonstrate that all historical makings are not just 'technological', but governed by a thoroughly 'religious' logic.³⁹ Yet, Marx retains the perspectives of liberalism in two ways. First, he gives a 'materialist' version of Hegel's dialectics that still regards the capitalist economy as a necessary phase within the process of human becoming. Secondly, he envisions the 'utopian' phase in terms of the unleashing of human freedom and the unlimited possibility of human transformation of nature. This essentially liberal and secular goal is therefore no longer secured by market completion or state policing, but by a mysterious return of a lost harmony with nature.⁴⁰ While Hegel reads historical society as the objective presence of God, Marx reads historical society as right down to its economic base, the religious illusion of the present. His entire theory of religion as 'projection' rests on the notion that man is the true worthy object of worship and that religion displaces worship from its real site, man, to an imaginary site, God.⁴¹ However, Marx can only criticize Christianity by situating it within a metanarrative that itself has a 'quasi-religious' character. Though he exposes cultural processes as themselves 'religious', he can only contrast them with as new 'natural law' of humanity.⁴² Marx eventually perpetuates an ontology of violence by rejecting equivalence and socialism in favour of communism. In communism he invents an impossible naturalistic mysticism, at once anarchic and technocratically totalitarian.⁴³

While Milbank shares Postmodernism's critique of modernism and utilizes postmodern epistemological premises to construct his alternative Christian counter narrative, he also accuses secular Postmodernism of being complicit in using an ontology of 'violence'. Milbank states that secular Postmodernism articulates itself as an absolute historicism, an ontology of difference and as an ethical nihilism.⁴⁴ By 'absolute historicism' Milbank means that postmodernism understands every concept and claim in terms of a genealogy that exposes how a truth claim operates within a network of power struggles and mutually incompatible claims to dominance.⁴⁵ Postmodern thinkers develop an understanding of Being that is connected to a pointless play of difference in order to address this deficiency. They construe the world in terms of equivocal 'difference' that is conceived of as a play of power, while reality is seen as a constant flux of perpetual conflict requiring a negotiation and resolution of that conflict by means of competing discourses.⁴⁶ This condition of ontological 'difference' eventually leads to an ethical nihilism where the over-arching

game is the play of force, fate and luck.⁴⁷ Secular Postmodernism is not able to escape an ontology of 'violence' because it does not escape the notion of the ontological priority of an 'primordial chaos' that needs to be managed.⁴⁸

Having summarized Milbank's depiction of secular social theory as inherently 'violent', we now turn to the alternative that Milbank proposes.

Milbank's counter narrative: A Christian ontology of peace

Milbank is not interested in providing an immanent critique of social theory and secular thought because it will leave the underlying ontology of 'violence' in tact. Instead, he attempts to provide an authentic Christian ontology of peace that will serve as an alternative master narrative. Milbank rejects postmodernism's assertion that we can escape the notion of a master narrative, since the master narrative of neo-liberalist capitalism is increasingly colonizing modern society, and any narrative of resistance against these tendencies can also be understood as a master narrative.⁴⁹ However, Milbank agrees with thinkers such as Lyotard and Derrida that a master narrative does not need to be metaphysically founded. Nor can it be founded on reason. This, however, does not prevent us from having faith in our narratives. The Christian narrative is, like all narratives, essentially a 'fiction' that is metaphysically no more founded than other narratives. Theological speech ought not to pretend to offer a direct representation of reality, independent of our speech, because speech and reality are intertwined.⁵⁰ The Christian narrative's assignment, therefore, is to provide a better story, a convincing *mythos*, that out-narrates all other narratives and provide an alternative for the nihilism of our time.

Whereas secular social theory is, according to Milbank, based on the myth of original violence and chaotic conflict that must be tamed by the stability and self-identity of reason, Christianity recognizes no original violence. It construes the infinite not as chaos but as a harmonic peace.⁵¹ Milbank states his project as follows:

Any hopeful political project requires a sense that we inhabit a cosmos in which the realization of good and justice might be at least a possibility. But that means, first of all, that we must consider the good to be more than a human illusion, but rather in some sense an ultimate reality, ontologically subsisting before evil, both human and natural.⁵²

Milbank bases his ontology of peace on the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Through its belief in creation from nothing Christianity admits temporality, the priority of becoming and unexpected emergence.

Creation is a gift from God, but also a developing order where created difference proceeds from the continuous emanation of divine difference. Existing harmonies, existing extensions of time and space, constantly give rise to new intentions, to movements of the Spirit, to further creative expression, new temporal unravelings of creation *ex nihilo*, in which human beings must consciously participate.⁵³ Creation is not a finished product in space, but is continuously generated *ex nihilo* in time.⁵⁴ Since the world is about the movement of being's reconciliation with itself, the 'out of nothingness' from which everything comes is peacefulness, harmony and reconciliation. Violence and evil are secondary intrusions on reality and must therefore be regarded as privation.⁵⁵

While nihilism regards the continuous flux in reality as a perpetual conflict, Christianity does not, according to Milbank, attempt to abolish difference, but rather to subsume it. He states it as follows:

Christianity is peculiar, because while it is open to difference – to a series of infinitely new additions, insights, progressions towards God, it also strives to make all these differential additions a harmony in the body of Christ, and claims that if the reality of God is properly attended to, there can be such a harmony.⁵⁶

If we understand creation to be *ex nihilo* and through God's word (Logos), language ought to be seen as primordial and reality as fundamentally linguistic in nature. Language, which for Milbank includes the entire range of significant human cultural productions, is not representative but constitutive of reality. In Milbank's thinking, man creates his linguistic reality so totally that man as original creator participates in some measure in *creatio ex nihilo*.⁵⁷

'Participation' is the key concept in Milbank's ontology of peace. He uses this Thomistic concept to conceive of differences as analogically related and therefore part of a harmonious order. If the finite participates in the eternal order through language the entire human orientation to objective reality is determined by the aesthetical discernment of the goodness of God's order. Christian life ought, therefore, to be understood as *poesis*, which is concerned with the recognition of forms that are suitable and fitting. Its work is the ceaseless re-narrating and explaining of history under the sign of the cross. The human being's poetic activity is driven by its expressive nature and desire to appropriate its environment as a system of value, which in the end creates a world of meaning.⁵⁸ The requirement that we join in *poesis* means that there can be no theoretical distance or objectivity.⁵⁹ Our poetic existence eventually leads into an encounter with God because somewhere among our cultural products God of his own free will finds the space to confront us.⁶⁰

According to Milbank, 'participation' affirms that creation is part of the differential life of God in a paradoxical coincidence of sharing and imitation. God is not a substance existing on his own, who in a certain moment decided to create something external. Creation is rather the differentiating of God.⁶¹ Participation concerns the created interplay between Being and beings and involves a situation in which one can only share by imitating and imitate by sharing. Our ability to imitate God is itself given by God as a share in Himself, and yet this is not an absorption into God because we stand in an imitative distance from him.⁶² Usually something that imitates something else is not part of that something else. But in our relationship to God we imitate God by partaking in Him because there is no existential space outside God.⁶³ At the same time our sharing in God can only happen by imitation, because God can not really be shared out. God can only be shared in by something other to Him that faintly copies Him.⁶⁴ Yet this something is also not other to God, because God is able to be shared in by every degree of being, precisely because he is indivisible and everywhere and really cannot be divided at all. The paradox that follows is that while the creature is not God, the heart of the creature is nonetheless God.⁶⁵

In the last decade Milbank has developed the notions of gift and gift exchange to explain the participation of the finite in the infinite.⁶⁶ In his recent *Stanton Lectures* Milbank asserts that the only true reality can be a shared reality – the giving of a gift by a Giver. 'Giving' is just as transcendental a term as 'being', and is inseparable from exchange.⁶⁷ With 'exchange', Milbank means that a recipient always has to respond to a gift in gratitude, but not in a similar fashion by giving the same gift back, because this would be an insult. There must be a *non-identical* repetition between gift and counter gift.⁶⁸ A real gift, therefore, must express something of the giver and yet leave the recipient a certain mimetic freedom to respond in gratitude. Gift exchange thus involves the apparent logical contradiction of a free gift that you must give, and an obligation that is not fulfilled unless you fulfill it in an entirely free way.⁶⁹

God expresses Himself in gift because He is the genuine Giver. He creates all *ex nihilo*, causes all by his grace, and goes on giving despite all our refusals.⁷⁰ The logic of creation *ex nihilo* means that all finite being without exception must be from God. Since all of reality is purely given, the return that finite beings make to the ultimate source is also given. The creature's very being, after all, resides in its reception of itself as gift.⁷¹ Consequently, a return is inevitably made.⁷² From creation to redemption God gives, and brings humanity into a Trinitarian gift exchange.⁷³ This gift exchange occurs according to a paradox of unilateral reciprocity, whereby God gives all, but because all is gift, the ontological basis of reality is gratitude and return, even though this very gratitude and capacity for return is itself given by God.⁷⁴

Milbank views the Church as an agapeic community, that is, a genuine community of infinite gift exchange that repeats the content of Christ's life, albeit in a different manner, as response to God's gift in Christ.⁷⁵ In so doing, it perpetuates and renews a Creation prior to all coercion and conflict.⁷⁶ It is a community of 'virtue' that desires to train its members towards certain ends, rather than a 'community of rights' founded on liberal indifference.⁷⁷ Genuine ecclesiology, for Milbank, comprises a philosophy of history that recounts the Church's actual concrete intervention in the social order. Christianity essentially involves the claim that the 'interruption' of history by Christ and his bride, the Church, is the most fundamental of events, interpreting all other events.⁷⁸ Jesus came to expose the secret of social violence hidden since the foundation of the world and to preach the kingdom as the possibility of a life refusing mimetic rivalry and, in consequence, violence.⁷⁹ Milbank regards the church as the *altera civitas* on pilgrimage through this temporary world, its goal is peace and its means are non-coercive.⁸⁰ Because the Church is already, by virtue of its institution, a reading of other human societies it becomes possible to consider ecclesiology as also a sociology, and at the same time to think of theology as social science.⁸¹ All political theory is relocated by Christianity as thought about the church, which is a new community that practices a new ethos that is characterized by non-violence, charity, peace, reconciliation and forgiveness.⁸² Through its practice of forgiveness, charity and virtue it is able to create a positive relation to difference and to offer others space for freedom.⁸³ By denying the ontological necessity of sovereign rule and absolute ownership and seeking to recover the reality of an original peaceful creation beneath the negative distortion of *dominium*, the church is able to realize the political objectives of justice and virtue that the polis could not arrive at.⁸⁴ Human relations therefore need to be brought within the true asylum of the church.

The essence of Milbank's counter narrative can be summarized as confirming three major components: First, the practice of charity and forgiveness as part of a non-identical response to God's gift. Second, the reconciliation of difference by practicing virtue, charity and forgiveness. Third, the treatment of peace as primary reality and chaotic original violence as the denial of reality.

The question emanating from this is: How would Milbank apply this ontology of peace to the political and economic realms? Not surprisingly Milbank utilizes the notion of gift, which really lies at the centre of his participatory theory, to provide an alternative approach to politics and economics.

According to Milbank the only justification for democracy could be theological.⁸⁵ The ontological priority of good also implies the ontological priority of life and the imperative to live ethically and politically out of

this priority and not within the damage-limitation exercise of legality.⁸⁶ He defines the human as a divine gift, defined by his sharing-in and reflection-of divine qualities of intellect, goodness and glory.⁸⁷ Since the people are potentially the Church, and since nature always anticipates grace, truth finally lies dispersed between people.⁸⁸ Law is what a citizen may apply, but at the same time is what the citizen should in turn be ruled by.⁸⁹ It is a mode of political gift exchange, given that law confers the benefits of order and justice. The sole legitimating ground of government, therefore, lies in the active and donative, rather than reactive and defensive.⁹⁰ For Milbank the task of government is to further realize the natural order in order to offer the gift of creation back to God, who is no arbitrary sovereign, but a giver.⁹¹ In theology 'rule' means to 'provide good order', which is to give something. Political rule is in essence an imparting of power, in the same way that God shares his rule, since we rule and own by receiving God's gift and passing it on. In shaping and constructing new gifts we constantly discern a new human teleology.⁹² Milbank consequently encourages a mode of democracy that is linked to the idea of the infallible presence of the Holy Spirit who creates an exchange of gifts in the whole body of the Church and by extension in humanity across all times and places.⁹³ Since all human society to some degree foreshadows the Church, people should give their insights and talents to the sovereign representative who acts in their name.⁹⁴ Unlike liberal democracy, this Christian democracy, which is constituted from the mass donation of varied talents, has a hierarchic dimension: the transmission of the gift of truth across time and the reservation of a non-democratic educative sphere concerned with finding the truth, not ascertaining majority opinion.⁹⁵

With regard to economics, Milbank is a proponent of a kind of economic socialism that lies between capitalism and centralization, as opposed to the market system, which he regards as an ordering of a 'substantively anarchic competition between wills to power'.⁹⁶ His 'socialist' views rest on the notion that societies are fundamentally bound together by mutual generosity, not contract. Contract can never be the thing that fundamentally brings people together in the first place, nor can it represent the highest ideal of a true distributive justice. Before and after contract lies gift, since gift is more socially ideal.⁹⁷ Milbank proposes that gift-exchange must become a mode of economy. If we lived in an economy of gift we would not be indifferent to the consequences of our actions, now treated like sellable products, but we would 'go' with our gifts, and others in receiving them creatively would continue to care for us in this employment.⁹⁸ A gift economy entails that producers do not just enter into contract with consumers. The latter give them effectively counter gifts of sustenance in return for gifts of intrinsically good things,

even though this is mediated by money.⁹⁹ Milbank describes the new kind of market he envisages as follows:

A re-subordination of money transaction to a new mode of universal gift exchange. This requires that in every economic exchange of labour or commodity there is always a negotiation of ethical value at issue. Indeed, economical value should only be ethical value, while inversely ethical value should be seen as emerging from the supply and demand of intrinsic gifts. For ethical value is not for Christianity just virtue: rather it is supremely informed by charity and therefore it is the forging of bonds through giving and receiving.

The human exchange of talents and of material benefits, in the end, can only be a just exchange where there are constantly re-negotiated and agreed upon standards concerning the human common good.¹⁰⁰

Evaluation

The first question posed in the introduction is whether Milbank's description of secular thought as undergirded by an ontology of violence is valid? Milbank does indeed point out important weaknesses in modern liberalism and secular thought. He is certainly correct that secular reason is, to a large degree, driven by the assumption that the natural order contains a primordial element of chaotic conflict between opposing interests that must be regulated by stable reason. The major deficiency in some forms of secular reason seems to be that it often regards difference as 'threatening' and 'conflictual' and thus as something that needs to be abolished through counter actions that may contain forms of counter violence. Universalism, totalitarianism and the promotion of self-interested individualism are clear historical examples of such coercive responses to difference. Yet, pluralism and difference is not a mere 'mythos', but it is a fact of life that must be dealt with in some way or another. Recognizing the effects that pluralism may have on the dynamics of a society does not necessarily amount to the endorsement of an ontology of 'violence', nor to a negative attitude towards difference. To state that all forms of secular discourse are undergirded by an ontology of nihilistic violence seems to be a harsh overstatement and a simplistic genealogical reduction of the history of human thought. Political liberalism, for instance, directs itself against the use of political power to enforce 'sameness' on society. It regards peaceful co-existence as a goal in itself and attempts to promote it within pluralist societies by preserving individual liberties that allow for a diverse range of identities. To equate political liberalism with a nihilistic 'violent' ontology is to distort the very

foundation of political liberalism, because political liberalism refrains from comprehensive and substantial notions of the good.

Milbank is able to describe secular thought as undergirded by an ontology of 'violence' only because of his very comprehensive use of the term. This brings us to the most fundamental flaw in his genealogical account: He does not define the term 'violence' clearly. It seems as if Milbank regards all truth claims, forms of rivalry, competition and acts of power as 'violent'. Yet, can the terms 'violence' and 'power' be used interchangeably in all contexts? Are all dynamics of power play such as attempts to engage, influence, persuade and communicate through strength and skill necessarily 'violent'? Because Milbank regards all forms of power dynamics as 'violent', he can state that 'our entire conduct is penetrated by violence'.¹⁰¹ Insole¹⁰², however, rightly notes that Milbank's use of the terms 'violence' and 'power' leads to a conceptual breakdown, because he universalizes these terms to such a degree that moral distinctions can no longer be made. A concept that describes absolutely everything ceases to pick out anything in particular at all. As will be seen later, Milbank's counter narrative could also be described as 'violent' if Milbank's use of the terms 'violence' and 'power' are applied to their full extent.

Furthermore, not all forms of 'violence' are, as Milbank maintains, necessarily bad. Often good violence is needed to counteract and root out bad violence. There is sometimes a necessity for a violence which punishes, protects, liberates and reconciles. The Christian faith itself has traditionally affirmed the need for a kind of redemptive violence in its doctrine on atonement. My conclusion is that Milbank's description of secular thought as based on an ontology of 'violence' is valid, but only to a certain extent. Unfortunately, his universalist and ambiguous use of the term 'violence' creates all kinds of oxymorons that prove to be insolvable.

The second question is whether Milbank succeeds in providing a Christian counter narrative that is able to offer an adequate and viable alternative to modern social theory? In my view, Milbank's alternative narrative contains several inherent contradictions. His purpose is to affirm theology as the queen of sciences and to eradicate the notion that philosophy (reason) and theology (faith) can be separated. For Milbank, a secular worldview must be abandoned in its entirety and solely Christian sources must be used.¹⁰³ Yet, in order to make room for theological speech he uses the postmodernist notion of language as constituting, not representing, reality; thereby creating the possibility for a master narrative not rooted in rational certainty. However, if he wants to establish theology as the only viable counter narrative to modernity's nihilism, one would expect Milbank to root his claims exclusively in the Christian narrative itself. The question is, how can Milbank claim the primacy of theology if his Christian master narrative is based on a non-Christian philosophical premise?

I furthermore strongly doubt whether Milbank himself is able to escape violent tendencies in his Christian story? Jacobs¹⁰⁴ rightly notes that Milbank seems to execrate everything that falls outside the tightly drawn boundaries of Orthodoxy. All who do not adhere to the Orthodox Catholic Christian story are ultimately seen as complicit in promoting nihilism. Milbank's arguments are indeed permeated with binary oppositions and stereotypical types of reasoning. Modernism is, for instance, equated with 'Anti-Christianity'; Protestantism is described as part of the decline of theology, an ally of Capitalism, and as 'theologies of mere imputation'; while postmodernism is portrayed as the ultimate form of nihilism.¹⁰⁵ This antagonistic tone of Milbank's Christian *mythos* contradicts the ontology of peace on which he prides himself. Jacobs¹⁰⁶ rightly states:

Milbank may labour to establish his story sold as the ultimate story of peace; on a structural level, it exhibits quite clearly features of a holy war ideology.

Another contradiction in Milbank's counter narrative is the imaginary method that he employs to construct his Christian master narrative, while rejecting exactly the same kind of methodology when he deconstructs political liberalism. Milbank states the following with regard to the artificial method that political liberalism uses in constructing the notion of a social contract:

Liberalism is peculiar and unlikely because it proceeds by inventing a wholly artificial human being who has never really existed, and then pretending that we are all instances of such a species....To this blank entity one attaches 'rights'.¹⁰⁷

Ironically, Milbank uses the same kind of imaginary method that he resists in political liberalism by invoking an artificial city of God to construct a 'social space' that allows him to create a theological worldview in service of his political agenda. Milbank's master narrative, in general, is characterized by a form of abstract reflection that lacks specificity. He eschews the historical by portraying being and existence as the product of thought. His discourse therefore functions extensively on the level of the 'speculative' and runs the risk of remaining in the speculative realm, despite his claim that our form of existence must eventually take form in a social community. The particular history of Christ, for instance, is circumvented, while Christ's position within a system of signs is stressed. The result is an abstract theological-philosophical system that replaces the particular event of Christ's life with a form of abstraction that takes on a life of its own. This scheme of things is possible because Milbank's

consistently fuses Christian Platonic ontology and a postmodern linguistic discourse to impose general truths on the particular. The result is a closed and rather fideistic system of thinking that lacks particularity and tends to be unfalsifiable because it operates purely on the level of the non-factual. Hedley rightly notes that Milbank's fideism leaves theology itself in an alarmingly precarious state: attacking rationality may fend off the despisers of religion, but also removes reason as one of the important sources of religion.¹⁰⁸

A troubling aspect of Milbank's master narrative is that he consistently describes it as 'equally unfounded'. His argument basically is that every claim to truth is unfounded because it is a form of genealogical reduction that claims power. There is consequently no need for Christian theology to engage rationally with secular reason because there is no neutral foundational rational space.¹⁰⁹ In the end we only find a number of narratives that, though unfounded, attempt to out-narrate each other by providing a better story. Insole¹¹⁰ rightly notes that there is something fundamentally wrong with such a kind of argument because it imitates the errors that it attempts to replace. Milbank wants to re-instate a master narrative, but he is aware that he cannot simply return to a traditional master narrative for then he is subject to postmodernism's criticism. Instead he posits his master narrative as 'fiction', a story that knows it is a story.¹¹¹ However, it is hard to see how the power of persuasion could be kept intact if we can base our views only on 'fiction'. Joas¹¹² rightly notes that one cannot use the word 'fictional' here without becoming self-contradictory, because the word 'fiction' presupposes a contrast with 'nature' or reality. Though Milbank firmly rejects relativism, his 'fictional' understanding of rationality, ironically, reinforces relativism by causing a kind of nihilism that views truth as eternally elusive and theoretical discourse as limited to mere storytelling.

Apart from the contradictions in Milbank's master narrative, I am of the view that Milbank's social and political theory is not viable. Milbank attempts to conform theology into a social science that is primarily determined by ecclesiology.¹¹³ For Milbank the church is not one social institution among many, but as God's *altera civitas* it encompasses all the distinct social entities that make up a society. The church provides the structural logic for human society. However, the theological principles of an ecclesial society can ultimately not be imposed on a political society. The political sphere functions according to its own distinctive set of rules. Milbank will, of course, dismiss such a critique as symptomatic of univocalism, but the harsh reality is that his social theory ultimately collapses into a form of theocracy, precisely because he attempts to reinstate the hegemony of theology, which entails that theology alone can provide a true account of the real, while all other social theories are depicted as anti-theologies in disguise.¹¹⁴ Since Milbank allows for no

common ground between the Christian faith and secular realm, he fails to come to terms with pluralism and the possibility of different spheres of life that can sustain an authentic and distinctive existence outside the *ecclesia*. In my view, only a social theory that takes the structural differentiation between different spheres of life and the integrity of every sphere seriously will be able to address pluralism.

The danger of applying theological and ecclesial principles directly to the political and economic realm is illustrated by Milbank's attempt to understand social life in terms of gift and gift exchange. He ends up with a strange form of hierarchic communitarianism that affirms the priority of the community over the individual. The state becomes a donor of gifts that offers creation as gift back to God, individuals need to offer their talents to the sovereign, and the sovereign, though elected by the people, must seek truth and ought not to be interested in majority opinion. Conversely, the economy should be a socialist economy based first of all on mutual generosity and local trade, while contractual relations should be reduced to the minimum. The problem with Milbank's approach to politics and economics lies in its otherworldly, utopian nature. His ecclesiocentric approach shows no regard for sound empirical research on social problems; does not deal with factual realities such as globalization, the corporate and global nature of modern economics and the unavoidable impersonal nature of modern markets; the need of constitutional mechanisms to deal with the constant threat of power abuse by governments; or the problem of governing plural societies consisting of many groups and faiths. Most surprisingly Milbank does not seem to realize that communitarian ideologies have in the past exhibited an inherent tendency to degenerate into forms of totalitarianism; the very state of affairs that he tries to avoid.

Conclusion

Milbank's attempt to re-assert the importance of theology in scientific and social debate must be welcomed. His deconstruction of secular thought, though displaying some flaws, is an important contribution to the dialogue between different social sciences. Unfortunately, his definition of violence is so comprehensive and universal that it ultimately leads to a conceptual breakdown. Milbank's alternative ontology of peace is, in my view, also not viable as a social theory. He overextends his claims through his ecclesiocentric social theory that attempts to re-establish theology as the queen of sciences that inform all other sciences. Consequently, he operates with a theocratic form of reasoning that cannot be applied in modern pluralist societies. Ultimately, his ontology of peace does not escape relativism because of its depiction of rationality as 'fiction', nor does it escape 'violence' in the Milbankian sense because of the exclusivist, binary and oppositional type

of logic he employs. In the end Milbank's social theory is too speculative in nature and weak in empirical observation to provide a sensible way forward.

Notes:

¹ Cf Tom Jacobs, "Flirting with premodernity: John Milbank and the return of the (Christian) master-narrative", *The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University*, 34 (2006):1.

² John Milbank, *Theology and social theory. Beyond secular reason*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006): xiv.

³ Milbank, *Beyond secular reason*, 4.

⁴ Milbank, *Beyond secular reason*, 6.

⁵ Milbank, *Beyond secular reason*, 5.

⁶ John Milbank, "Postmodern critical Augustinian: a short summa in forty-two responses to unasked questions", *Modern Theology*, 7, 3 (1991): 227.

⁷ John Milbank, "The last of the last: theology, authority and democracy", *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, 58 (2002): 274.

⁸ John Milbank, *Transcendence without participation*, Stanton Lecture 4, (2011): 1. <http://theologyphilosophycentre.co.uk>.

⁹ Milbank, "Transcendence without participation", 3.

¹⁰ Milbank, "The last of the last", 278.

¹¹ Cf John Milbank, "The mystery of reason" in *The grandeur of reason*, ed. Peter. M Candler and Conor Cunningham (Norwich: SCM Press, 2010), 75.

¹² Cf John Milbank, *The return of metaphysics in the 21st century*, Stanton lecture 1, (2011): 5, <http://theologyphilosophycentre.co.uk/>. (accessed November 2, 2011).

¹³ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 16.

¹⁴ John Milbank, *Participated transcendence reconceived*, Stanton lecture 5, (2011): 1, <http://theologyphilosophycentre.co.uk>. (accessed November 2, 2011).

¹⁵ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 16.

¹⁶ Milbank, *Transcendence without participation*, 4.

¹⁷ Milbank, *Transcendence without participation*, 4.

¹⁸ Milbank, *Transcendence without participation*, 4.

¹⁹ Milbank, *Transcendence without participation*, 5.

²⁰ Jacobs, 8.

²¹ Milbank, "Beyond social theory", 28.

²² John Milbank, "Liberality versus liberalism", 3. <http://theologyphilosophycentre.co.uk>. (accessed November 2, 2011).

²³ Milbank, "Liberality", 11, 13.

²⁴ Milbank, "Liberality", 3.

²⁵ Cf Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 28, 37.

²⁶ Cf Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 38-39, 41, 45.

²⁷ Cf Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 53.

²⁸ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 51.

²⁹ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 52.

³⁰ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 75.

- ³¹ Cf Alexandra Klaushofer, "Faith beyond nihilism: The retrieval of theism in Milbank and Taylor", *Heythrop Journal* XL (1999): 137.
- ³² Cf Joel Robbins, "Anthropology and sociology: an awkward relationship?", *Anthropological Quarterly* (2006): 289. Cf Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 82, 103.
- ³³ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 156.
- ³⁴ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 156.
- ³⁵ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 158.
- ³⁶ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 158, 159.
- ³⁷ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 177.
- ³⁸ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 205.
- ³⁹ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 188.
- ⁴⁰ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 177, 178.
- ⁴¹ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 180, 183.
- ⁴² Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 190.
- ⁴³ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 205.
- ⁴⁴ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 278.
- ⁴⁵ Cf Christopher J. Insole, "Against radical Orthodoxy: the dangers of overcoming political liberalism", *Modern Theology*, 20, 2 (2004, April), 219.
- ⁴⁶ Cf Jacobs, 8, Insole, 219.
- ⁴⁷ Cf John Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 279.
- ⁴⁸ Cf Debra Dean Murphy, "Power, politics and difference: A feminist response to John Milbank", *Modern theology*, 10, 2 (1994, April), 134.
- ⁴⁹ Cf Jacobs, 4.
- ⁵⁰ Cf Jacobs, 11.
- ⁵¹ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 5-6.
- ⁵² Milbank, "Paul against biopolitics", 161.
- ⁵³ John Milbank, "Postmodern critical Augustinianism", 236.
- ⁵⁴ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 431.
- ⁵⁵ Cf John Milbank, *Being Reconciled. Ontology and pardon*, London: Routledge, (2003), 17.
- ⁵⁶ Milbank, "Postmodern critical Augustinianism", 227.
- ⁵⁷ Cf Wayne J. Hankey, "Theoria versus poesis: Neo-Platonism and Trinitarian difference in Aquinas, John Milbank, Jean-Luc Marion and John Zizioulas", *Modern theology*, 15/4 (1999, October), 391.
- ⁵⁸ Cf John Milbank, *The word made strange: Theology, language, culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997): 124.
- ⁵⁹ Cf Wayne Hankey, "Theoria versus poesis", 397.
- ⁶⁰ Milbank, "The word made strange", 74.
- ⁶¹ Jacobs, 18.
- ⁶² Milbank, "Participated transcendence reconceived", 2.
- ⁶³ Milbank, *Transcendence without participation*, 10.
- ⁶⁴ Milbank, *Transcendence without participation*, 10-11.
- ⁶⁵ Milbank, *Transcendence without participation*, 11.
- ⁶⁶ Cf Milbank, "Participated transcendence reconceived", 6.
- ⁶⁷ John Milbank, "Can a gift be given? Prolegomena to a future Trinitarian metaphysic", *Modern Theology*, 11,1 (1995, January): 119, 121.
- ⁶⁸ Milbank, "Can a gift be given?", 125.
- ⁶⁹ Milbank, *Transcendence without participation*, 27.

- ⁷⁰ Milbank, "Can a gift be given?", 134.
- ⁷¹ John Milbank, "The habit of reason", Stanton Lecture 6, <http://theologyphilosophycentre.co.uk>. (accessed November 2, 2011), 21.
- ⁷² Milbank, "Can a gift be given?", 135
- ⁷³ Cf Todd Billings, "John Milbank's theology of the gift and Calvin's theology of grace: A critical comparison", *Modern Theology*, 21,1 (2005), 88.
- ⁷⁴ Milbank, *Transcendence without participation*, 18.
- ⁷⁵ Milbank, "Can a gift be given?", 119, 149-150.
- ⁷⁶ Cf Hankey, 397
- ⁷⁷ John Milbank, "The name of Jesus: Incarnation, atonement, ecclesiology", *Modern Theology*. 7, 4 (1991, July), 321.
- ⁷⁸ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 390.
- ⁷⁹ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 396.
- ⁸⁰ Cf Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 382.
- ⁸¹ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 382, 383.
- ⁸² Cf Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 410.
- ⁸³ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 422.
- ⁸⁴ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 414, 423.
- ⁸⁵ Milbank, "Liberality", 5.
- ⁸⁶ Milbank, "Paul against biopolitics", 161
- ⁸⁷ John Milbank, "The gift of ruling: Secularisation and political authority", *New Blackfriars*, 85, 996 (2004): 215.
- ⁸⁸ Milbank, "Liberality", 5.
- ⁸⁹ John Milbank, "Paul against biopolitics", *Theory Culture and Society*, 25, 7-8 (2008), 138.
- ⁹⁰ Milbank, "The gift of ruling", 216.
- ⁹¹ Milbank, "The gift of ruling", 238.
- ⁹² Cf Milbank, "The gift of ruling", 224, 230.
- ⁹³ Cf Milbank, "Liberality", 5.
- ⁹⁴ Milbank, "Liberality", 6.
- ⁹⁵ Milbank, "The gift of ruling", 231, Milbank, "Liberality", 7.
- ⁹⁶ John Milbank, "Sovereignty, Empire, Capital and Terror", *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, 2 (2002, Spring): 306.
- ⁹⁷ Milbank, "Liberality", 11.
- ⁹⁸ John Milbank, "The midwinter sacrifice: A sequel to 'can morality be Christian'", *Angelaki*, 6, 2 (2001, August): 59.
- ⁹⁹ Milbank, "Liberality", 12.
- ¹⁰⁰ Milbank, "Liberality", 22.
- ¹⁰¹ John Milbank, *The word made strange: Theology, language, culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 250.
- ¹⁰² Insole, 225, 226.
- ¹⁰³ John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, "Suspending the material: the turn of radical orthodoxy", in John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy* (London: Routledge, 1999): 2.
- ¹⁰⁴ Jacobs, 22, 23.
- ¹⁰⁵ Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 280, John Milbank, "Stale expressions of the management-shaped church", *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 21, 1 (2008): 117.
- ¹⁰⁶ Jacobs, 24.

¹⁰⁷ Milbank, "The gift of ruling", 213.

¹⁰⁸ Douglas Hedley, "Should divinity overcome metaphysics? Reflections on John Milbank's theology beyond secular reason and confessions of a Cambridge Platonist", *The Journal of Religion*, 80, 2 (2000, April): 272.

¹⁰⁹ Cf Insole, 224

¹¹⁰ Insole, 224

¹¹¹ Cf Paul Hedges, "Is John Milbank's Radical Orthodoxy a form of liberal theology? A rhetorical counter", *The Heythrop Journal*, LI (2010): 804.

¹¹² Joas, 235.

¹¹³ Cf Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 382.

¹¹⁴ Cf Milbank, "Beyond secular reason", 3, 6.

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