

Simplicity Itself: Milbank's Thesis

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John Milbank's work is familiar to the assiduous reader of *New Blackfriars*, who will recall his two-part study of William Warburton¹, as well as his more recent essays 'On Baseless Suspicion: Christianity and the Crisis of Socialism'² and 'Religion, Culture and Anarchy: the attack on the Arnoldian vision'. Although not incorporated materially into *Theology and Social Theory*, these essays open up related lines of investigation, and, having read them, one might not find his massive book so intimidating. It may be said, at least, that one might have been prepared for this venture into a post-Nietzschean theology which is also profoundly (Anglican) Catholic—an unlikely conjunction, one might have thought.

The book's dense scholarship and theoretical complexity are formidable, but, fortunately, in the title, the epigraph and the table of contents, we are offered three clues to the brilliantly simple thesis which it takes all the learning and argument in the rest of the book to expound and substantiate.

A book entitled *Theology and Social Theory* in a series containing titles such as *Theology and Philosophy*, *Theology and Politics* and the like, would naturally be expected to bring together in a mutually illuminating way what everyone is likely to think of as two radically different disciplines, each with its own autonomous method and distinctive discourse—'naturally', that is to say, in the cultural environment of carefully protected academic specialisms which we inhabit and which the author means to disrupt. Theologians, peering through the machicolations of faith-engaging scholarship, would learn from sociologists about the ways in which ideas are shaped by social processes. Sociologists, at least those few who specialise in religion, might glean a serendipitous insight in conversation with a friendly theologian as they set up research programmes or interpret their results, but, as scientists, their approach would of course be completely open-minded, impartial, neutral and above all 'secular'.

'Beyond Secular Reason', the subtitle runs. John Milbank's simple but ingenious thesis is that, far from being two separate and self-sustaining disciplines, theology already contains a great deal of social

theory while the social sciences are steeped in theology. Theologians have become increasingly (if reluctantly) aware, since they discovered the idea of the development of doctrine, that their constructions and even their paradigms are inescapably contingent and historical; but that does not go very deep. On the whole, according to Milbank, they suppose that most of what is to be known about social processes must still be learned from social scientists. He is thinking in particular of theologians who seize on some social theory of (usually) Marxist inspiration and work out what place remains for religion within the situation authoritatively described, as they suppose, by the social theory. Theology would thus deal only with what 'secular reason' leaves free—another version of 'God of the gaps' theology.

Milbank is struck, however, by recent developments within social theory itself which suggest that, contrary to the Marxist thesis about the priority of the economic base over the ideological and hence theological superstructure, there is *no* socio-economic reality which is more 'basic' than the reality of religion. Social theorists, influenced by Nietzsche, trace the formation of social structures to the will-to-power. While they mostly want to get rid of religion they acknowledge the subterranean presence of the mythic-ritual elements that social structures characteristically contain. (These are, of course, mostly French theorists: British sociologists would mostly be wary, and even uncomprehending, of this type of literature.)

The Nietzschean legacy is ambivalent. On the one hand it seems the last word in post-Enlightenment rationalism, a 'truly non-metaphysical mode of secular reason'. On the other hand, for all the declaimed scientific positivism and evolutionary naturalism, Nietzsche's work also embodies an ontology of non-human power and primordial conflict which is simply a return to a pagan perception of life. It looks as if something metaphysical, and thus in some sense something theological, rears its head in even the most obsessively pagan 'genealogy of morals' so far invented.

Paradoxically, then, post-Nietzschean social theorists have recognized that the mythic-religious dimension of social structures cannot be treated as superstructural, while most theologians go on naively submitting to the authority of the supposedly secular discipline of the social sciences. While post-Nietzschean social theorists become suspicious of allegedly secular rationality, post-Enlightenment theologians go on innocently working under the constraints of their respect for precisely that. Theologians accept the autonomy of secular reason, and thus place themselves under the rule of methodological atheism, whereas social theorists now recognize the practical

inescapability of theistic or anti-theistic elements, however disguised and displaced, in any social order they study.

In one sense, then, Milbank's thesis is simplicity itself. There is no need to bring theology and social theory together, theology is *already* social theory, and social theory is *already* theology. The task is to lay bare the theology, and anti-theology, at work in supposedly non-theological disciplines like sociology, and, analogously, to uncover the social theory inscribed in theology—not just the methodological humanism mistakenly respected by modern theologians but the theory of society which Christian theology, properly practised, always already is. Whether one agrees in the end, or even succeeds in following much of Milbank's extremely learned and densely argued exposition of this thesis, is another matter. One cannot doubt the brilliant simplicity of the thesis itself.

The epigraph offers a second clue to the simplicity of Milbank's thesis: 'For both "civil" and "fabulous" theologies are alike fabulous and civil'. The quotation comes from St Augustine's great book, *The City of God* (the reference needs to be corrected: it is to chapter 8, not chapter 9, of Book VI.) One way into Milbank's book is to read the last chapter first, where it becomes clear that *Theology and Social Theory* is essentially a creative retrieval of Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*. Briefly, Augustine argued that the peace of the earthly City (the Roman empire) was a peace created by arbitrary limitation of a preceding state of conflict, whereas the true peace of the heavenly City (the Catholic Church) was a state of harmonious agreement indistinguishable from a community of love and a realization of justice for all. However various the customs and institutions which bring human beings together and divide them, there are, Augustine thought, in the final resort, only two kinds of human association: the alliance of those who live according to the flesh and the community of those who live according to the spirit, each in the 'peace' appropriate to their kind. For Milbank, as for Augustine, peace and non-violence are ontologically prior to, and more basic than, the anarchy and strife which, on most views of the world, including gnostic forms of Christianity, are primordial and foundational, so that religious strategies (if any), like political ones, can do no more than hold it in check. On a proper ('Catholic') understanding of the Christian doctrine of creation, on the other hand, sin of any kind has to be secondary: reality is fundamentally good ('And God saw . . .'), evil is *privatio boni* and 'violence is an unnecessary intrusion'. Again, whatever one makes of it, the thesis is simplicity itself: Christianity is committed to the ontological priority of nonviolence, harmony and peace over anarchy, aggression and war.

The third preliminary clue to entering Milbank's book is the table of contents. Theology is played off against 'liberalism' (Part I), 'positivism' (II), 'dialectics' (III) and finally 'difference' (IV). In effect, we are being offered a post-Nietzschean history of modern western views of reality as a prelude to retrieving Christian theology.

'Liberalism', in this connection, is a Bad Thing. It is a commonplace, across the spectrum from socialists and feminists to conservatives and neo-ultramontanist Catholics, that liberalism is to be rejected for its 'individualism'—for occluding the manifest ways in which human beings are 'situated' in a network of social roles and communal relationships. In a misguided attempt to protect the autonomy and the natural rights of the individual, liberalism as a moral and political philosophy only undermines the communities which alone enable human beings to flourish. So the story goes. Theologically, at least since Newman's denunciations of it, liberalism in religion operates on the assumption that believers are free to use, or change, or discard, religious symbols and doctrines, according to their current experiential value for the individual. Politically, as Nicholas Boyle showed in his 'Understanding Thatcherism', the belief in the primacy of individual desires has driven the ideology of British central government since 1979.

Historically, according to Milbank, in seventeenth-century thinkers such as Grotius and Hobbes, the concepts of sovereignty, autonomy, property, power, and so on, which were to generate the new 'secular' disciplines of political theory, economics and sociology, emerged from the late-medieval theological matrix of an effectively non-Trinitarian theism which celebrated a notion of the absolute will of the divine monarch. The 'anthropology' which celebrates human beings as atomistic individuals, with their individuality defined essentially as will, would thus be the spin-off of a (distinctly non-Thomist!) voluntarist monotheism. The modern liberal-individualist conception of the human person would thus be a product of a heretical (because barely if at all Trinitarian) conception of God.

In Part II of his book Milbank introduces us to the notion of 'positivism': that supposedly non-metaphysical concentration on the facts, on the given, which, in Comte and his progeny, has encouraged the idea of sociology as almost (if not quite) one of the natural sciences. At about the same time, indeed rather earlier, such conservative Catholic thinkers as de Bonald, de Lamennais, de Maistre and Ballanche, were reasserting the social nature of human beings, reacting so strongly against the liberal doctrine of the autonomy of the individual will that they created an ecclesiocentric positivism, usually labelled

'traditionalism', which was officially ruled out at the Vatican Council (1870). Just as Marx famously stood Hegel on his head, so Milbank nicely says, Comte did the same to de Bonald. The ferociously royalist Catholic's mystical corporatism turned quite easily into the methodological humanist's cult of the *fait sociale*. (For that matter, Comte borrowed a great deal from Catholic liturgy when he invented the new religion he regarded as essential to the spread of altruism, including even a 'Positivist Calendar' in which the names of scientists replaced those of the saints.) For the positivists as for the Catholic reactionaries, the social order is a totality which is prior to the creative activities of human beings. Once again, then, social theory and theology mirror one another, and the latter even generates the former. In effect, as Milbank says, theology encounters in sociology only a theology in disguise.

In Part III, in which theology is confronted with 'dialectics', Milbank deals with Hegel, Marx and some liberation theologians. The trouble with these last, briefly, is that they remain imprisoned in Karl Rahner's non-historical metaphysics of human subjectivity ('Not without distress do I realize that some of my conclusions here coincide with those of reactionaries in the Vatican'). In effect, they remain trapped in liberalism. They should have followed Blondel, Milbank argues, 'perhaps the boldest exercise in Christian thought of modern times' (*L'Action* appeared in 1893, when he was thirty two). By embracing his absolute historicism and perspectivism they would have escaped from the illusions of the quasi-divine solitary human subject.

The welcome and brilliant excursus on Blondel prepares the way for devastating criticism of Hegel, who turns out to remain trapped in the Cartesian myth of the autonomous self. He is 'still a liberal'. Like Hobbes, he traces the origins of human society to individual self-seeking. The new element is a gnostic myth, taken over from the Lutheran mystic Jakob Boehme, about the self-estranged and self-returning deity, but of course only one more deviation from a properly Christian understanding of creation.

In Part IV we turn to 'the thinking of difference', in effect French and German philosophy in the post-Nietzschean mode. All these thinkers, including Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Lyotard, corporately labelled 'nihilism' here, assume that reality is ultimately anarchy, which, in the absence of God, cannot be controlled except by subjecting it to the will to power in some form or another. Plurality of meaning is necessarily equivocation, contingency is fate, difference is rupture, and so on. In effect, the unity sought by previous generations of thinkers gives way to irrepressible plurality. What Nietzsche called *Monotontheismus* yields to crypto-polytheistic views of reality.

Alasdair MacIntyre, in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*⁵, has sought to retrieve a Christian moral philosophy which breaks with modern nihilism (otherwise known as emotivism, relativism, subjectivism, pluralism and so on). Milbank, offering us another clue, describes his book as 'a temeritous attempt to radicalize the thought of MacIntyre'—which, in the end, he finds too close to Aristotle and thus insufficiently Christian.

His own proposal, finally, is that, in contrast to all (*sic*) other views of the world, Christianity alone, properly understood, denies the ultimacy of chaos and conflict. Only Christianity—'and perhaps Judaism'—affirms that peace (*shalom?*) is coterminous with Being. Christian theology, properly understood, is alone capable of exposing and overcoming the liberalism, positivism, dialectics and nihilism inscribed in the ideology of western society, and so in our social and political theory essentially because all four of these configurations are themselves versions, or subversions, of theology.

A brilliantly simple thesis, then. But to see if it is sustainable, of course, one has to read the book.

- 1 John Milbank, 'William Warburton: an Eighteenth Century Bishop Fallen among the Post-Structuralists', *New Blackfriars*, vol.64, no. 757, July/ August 1983, pp.315–324 and vol.64, no.759, September 1983, pp.374–383.
- 2 John Milbank, 'On Baseless Suspicion: Christianity and the Crisis of Socialism', *New Blackfriars*, vol.69, no.812, January 1988, pp.4–19.
- 3 John Milbank, 'Religion, Culture and Anarchy: the attack on the Amoldian vision', *New Blackfriars*, vol.69, no.820, October 1988, pp.436–445.
- 4 Nicholas Boyle, 'Understanding Thatcherism', *New Blackfriars*, vol.69, no.818, July/August 1988, pp.307–324.
- 5 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* London: Duckworth, 1988.