Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision

+ Rowan Williams

Theology and Social Theory is a book that prompts conversation on almost every page - conversation of both the 'yes, and. . .' and the 'yes, but. . .' kind, as well as something like a 'no, but. . .' on occasion. An adequate review would have to be a kind of gloss, a talmudic margin. It is no small tribute to Milbank that this work is so hard to discuss briefly. What follows is not a review, but a few fragments of this reader's side of the conversation, assembled round a focal area of unease within an overall admiration for the learning and boldness of the enterprise. My title will hint at something of my discomfort: is Milbank's commitment to history and narrative, to time as the medium of benign creativity and non-competitive difference, fully realised in his exposition? Does he 'save time' in a theological sense or only in the colloquial one of getting more expeditiously to his goal than the circumstances might seem to warrant?

The project of reconstructing a Christian ontology by retelling the story of the Christian Church's origins, so as to display it as the history that makes sense of all histories, is heralded as one of the indispensable moments in the rehabilitation of a properly theological critique of secular order (e.g. p.381). 'The metanarrative. . . is the genesis of the Church' (p.387). This is an intriguing and exhilarating prospect; I am not sure if it has been carried through. Christian universalism is opposed to the 'orders' of non-Christian antiquity—the Roman sacralisation of dominion, with its programmatic refusal of a properly common good, and the Jewish commitment to law as the defining structure of a common good, at least for one specific community. The Church witnesses to a community without dominion, bonded by charity and forgiveness rather than law, ethnically unrestricted: in this definition of its ideal self, it uncovers what other orders characteristically lack, and the story of its emergence over against empire and synagogue begins to shape the kind of metanarrative now required for a critique of modern order (and presumably of the sacral order of other religious traditions, an entailment of Milbank's scheme worked out more fully in a later essay[1]). But the problem here is, I think, the trap of fusing historical narrative with 'essentialist', diagrammatic accounts of ideological

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options. The history of 'ecclesial origination' here offered is a narrative constructed from a position determined as outside the Jewish and Roman worlds of reference; and while Milbank would (rightly) reply that we cannot but tell the story from where we now are, from the standpoint of the *achieved*, the realised difference of the Church, we are not given any purchase on the specific points of strain or collision that gradually constituted the Church as historically and tangibly other than the orders it contests. It is as if this origination is the birth of a full-grown Minerva; and if narrative is *plotted*, a structured sequence of transformations, the metanarrative that is being sought is in danger of flattening out into a bald statement of timeless ideal differences.

To carry through the project more adequately might involve, for example, attention to the variety of ways in which Jewish identity in particular was constructed in the Second Temple period and after; to how and why the practice and teaching of Jesus came to conflict with the *politically* dominant definitions of Jewish probity and loyalty—which would in turn need some analysis of the economic role of the Temple and its administrators in occupied Judaea; to the specific character of the resurrection narratives as stories about the reconsolidation of Jesus' practice, especially in terms of the offer of forgiveness and unrestricted hospitality; to the characteristic crises of the early communities over issues of inclusion and purity and the relation of ethics to eschatology. It might also need to reckon with the fact that Mishnaic Judaism, which is definitive for practically all later developments, is itself shaped by response to a variety of first century problems and ruptures in the Jewish world - a sister rather than a mother to the Church, and not necessarily representing in its sophisticated views of law precisely what the Jewish world before 70 AD would have taken as axiomatic[2]. And we should have to trace the way in which Christian communities worked out an understanding of their unity and coherence, and how exactly this proved uncontainable within the Roman state (what were Christians tried for and why?)[3]

Now I am not, of course, complaining that Milbank should have written a social history of the first two Christian centuries; but I am concerned that the specific process by which Christian distinctiveness became aware of itself is occluded by the rather ahistorical framework of this narrative of origins. The telling of the story as a narrative of learning or discovery and of particular (economic or social or ritual) crises and conflicts would not weaken the 'metanarrative' project: on the contrary, it might well give it more substance. For the risk Milbank's exposition runs is, rather paradoxically, of slipping into a picture of history as the battlefield of ideal types. He notes (p.163) the oddity of

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the fact that in Hegel's system there is no real ground for the necessity of the Idea's appearance in an historical individual (I am by no means sure that he has fully got hold of what Hegel has to say about the historical Good Friday, incidentally)[4]; but a malign interpreter might say that the specificity of the first century Mediterranean world had been no less sacrificed here. The very faint suggestion that ecclesial life is determined by its negation of prior forms imperils just that historical gratuity and contingency that is essential to the whole project. There are some excellent observations (p.234) on how historical 'plot' can outrun 'character', yet be retrievable, narratively, as destiny. But if that destiny blurs the edges of the contingency of the plotting itself, we are landed back in a caricature version of Hegel, a vulgar dialecticism. Milbank emphatically does not want this outcome, nor does he give it explicit houseroom; but there is an unmistakable grid imposed on the vagaries of late antique social and intellectual history that does not help the case. There is more thought to be given to how the story of the Church's beginnings is to be adequately told.

The insistence on thinking Christ in inseparable relation with the Church is, however, one of the most important constructive elements of the book. Milbank's reservation (p.398) about Girard, that he is inclined to deal with Jesus rather than the Church and so fails to say enough about the 'idiom' of the peace adumbrated by the preaching and death of Jesus, is a searching point for the Girardian to answer. But this issue of idiom is one that again raises some questions about Milbank's procedure. The Christian imagination is of 'a state of total peace', enabling us 'to unthink the necessity of violence' and reaffirm the ontological priority of non-violence (p.411). It is a culture of corporate virtue, instead of competing heroisms, of difference without menace, and of forgiveness (earlier on — pp.168.172 — this has been contrasted with the merely formal reconciliations of Hegelianism). The recovery of a genuinely Augustinian political ethic, the virtues of God's *polis*, is another real achievement in the work; but some of the questions already hinted at return here, questions that would need to be put to aspects of Augustine as well. It seems that we are again confronted with something 'achieved', and left with little account of how it is learned, negotiated, betrayed, inched forward, discerned and risked. To speak of 'total peace' (and Derrida's anxiety about Levinas' comparable apocalypticism may be recalled here)[5] is not in fact to speak of a culture or an idiom - or really an *ethic*. Milbank boldly and obstinately contests the haunting of ethics by the tragic, to the extent that this might suggest an inevitability, a non-contingency, about evil. Yet I wonder whether the very ideas of culture, idiom and ethic insist on the tragic in some form.

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If our salvation is cultural (historical, linguistic, etc.), it is not a return to primordial harmonics, purely innocent difference. We are always already, in history, shaped by privation, living at the expense of each other: important moral choices entail the loss of certain specific goods for certain specific persons, because moral determination, like any 'cultural' determination, recognizes that not all goods for all persons are *contingently* compatible. The peace of the Church is going to be vacuous or fictive if it is not historically aware of how it is *constructed* in events of determination which involve conflict and exclusion of some kind.

This is really to say no more than that the minimalist theodicy of Augustinianism needs a hearing too: an authentically contingent world is one in which you cannot guarantee the compatibility of goods. That's what it *is* to be created. And when that contingency becomes meshed with rational beings' self-subverting choices of unreality over truth, the connectedness of human community becomes life-threatening as well as life-nurturing. That is what it is to be fallen. Grace does not give innocence, as Milbank is generally well and eloquently aware, it gives absolution, and the Church's peace is a healed history, not a 'total' harmony' whose constructed (and thus scarred) character doesn't show. And in our history, healing is repeatedly imperilled and broken by new decisions. The Church actually articulated its gospel of peace by speaking the language of repentance: failure can be 'negotiated' into what is creative. But this means that the peace of the Church *as an historical community* is always in construction. It does not promise a new and finished innocence in the order of time, but focuses the freedom of God constantly to draw that order back to difference that is nourishing, not ruinous.

Is this to succumb to a myth of necessary violence? Two points: first, the word 'violence' is both loaded and vague, and sometimes it is being made to do duty for any voluntary limiting of another's unrestricted will, while still retaining extreme pejorative connotations not necessarily appropriate to such a more general account. It ought to be possible to say that a contingent world is one in which contestation is inevitable, given that not all goods are 'compossible', without saying that there can be no healing or mending eschatologically, or that conflict and exclusion have either a sacred or a necessarily liberative character. Second, part of the problem lies in how to read the doctrine of creation itself. In God, according to orthodox Christian theology, there is difference without collision or competition, in the generating of the Word and the procession of the Spirit: this has often been agreed to be the ground for understanding the positing of difference 'outside' the

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divine life. But this positing is not a *repetition* of divine generation; it is the making of a world whose good will take time to realise, whose good is to emerge from uncontrolled circumstance - not by divine enactment in a direct sense, but by a kind of interaction of divine and contingent causality, entailing a divine responsiveness such as the doctrine of the Trinity again authorises, in letting us think both a divine giving and a divine receiving. Creation itself is not to be thought of as a moment of tragic rupture, a debauching of divine Wisdom, but it is surely pregnant with the risk of tragedy, conflicting goods, if the good of what is made is necessarily bound up with taking time. The Fall is not necessary, logically or ontologically, but (in Milbank's own language) its story can be 'retrieved' as one outworking of what creation (logically) cannot but make possible if it really is *other* to God.

What I am concerned to keep in view is the danger of setting the common life of the Church too dramatically apart from the temporal ways in which the good is realised in a genuinely contingent world. We might remember Simone Weil's insistence[6] that the attaining of goals in a material environment by timebound beings entails a 'mediation of desire': to get what we want, we have to perform actions that are not what we want, not themselves desirable - boring physical labour, for example. But this suggests that a theology of Church history involves theologising the risks taken by the Church in constructing its peace; and so too theologising about its misconstruals, its repeated slithering into premature totalisations, and, ultimately, theologising about the victims of the historical Church - even where this risks sharpening some of the particular conflicts of the Church's present life. The imagining of 'total peace' must somehow be accessible to those whose history is not yet heald or even heard in and by the Church (how might a woman tell this story as a story of peace or promise?).

Which leads me to some final reflections on Milbank's discussion of political theologies, European and Third World. Here the great strength of the treatment is its full and lucid exposition of something Gutierrez touched on in his earliest work, the close correlation between political options and theologies of grace and nature. A certain sort of chastened Thomism, vaguely inspired by Maritain, helps to legitimise 'Christian Democrat' parties of a liberal-centrist kind; a more 'integralist' view of grace and nature impels to a more revolutionary politics. Milbank brilliantly demonstrates the amiguities at work here. The problem with integralism is that it can suggest a definition of corporate and individual good in which the role of explicit reference to the saving action of God is obscure; statements about revelation, conversion, grace or holiness are always in danger of melting into

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supposedly universalisable beliefs about human goodness. There is no clear place from which the Church can call secularity to account. There is, in fact, an ersatz peace invoked here between the city of God and the earthly city. Add to this the effect of a poorly digested Marxist-Leninism, and you have a virtual abandonment of political ethics: necessary conflict necessarily delivers an advance in the realising of justice. Economics and politics are kidnapped by a new doctrine of providence (pp.244–5). And the familiar justification for contemporary use of (Marxist and other) social science to ground a political theology, the claim that this is simply a modern version of what Aquinas did with Aristotle, is sharply rebutted: modern social science is precisely what *replaces* authentic political ethics such as Aristoteleanism provided, and so cannot serve a political theology (p.248).

Milbank's dismantling of much of the rhetoric of liberation theology is an impressive critique, chiefly because it is done out of a conviction that liberation theology is *insufficiently political,* still caught in the Weberian trap of seeing cataclysmic social change as the condition for improved individual liberties - i.e. it fails to imagine what creative sociality is. There is some weight in this, and Milbank's impatience with some of the woolly nonsense that passes for theology in this context is readily intelligible. I think too that he has identified some serious difficulties in the project of the early Gutierrez and Juan Luis Segundo. But I also read these pages wondering how seriously they had grappled with more recent developments in Latin America debates about folk piety, about the suspicion and retrieval of popular images, about Christology. Increasingly, it has become impossible to generalise usefully about liberation theology as a project that makes Christian language and practice instrumental to a programme whose norms come from elsewhere. Taking a couple of examples almost at random from a collection published as long ago as the late 1970's[7], we can find Galilea and Assmann both insisting on the emptiness of what Milbank calls the 'instrumental enclosure' (p.242) of liberation theologies, and calling for a deepening of the charismatic and prophetic life of Christian communities as places where equality and forgiveness are realised locally and specifically, grounded in eucharistic worship and reflection on scripture.

Milbank's own conclusion, indeed, seems to envisage the Church's political calling very much in terms of the sustaining of paradigm creative political societies, like the Latin American base communities. But this might have led to some nuancing in the treatment of theologies of liberation, which, as it stands, will bring comfort to some whom Milbank would find unwelcome bedfellows (as he is clearly well

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aware). And even the unbalanced instrumentalism of some early liberationist writing should make us recall the sheer scale of corruption, repression and political infantilism which it confronted. Was it really so easy in 1970, say, to believe in the avoidance, the contingency of struggle, even armed struggle? Somewhere behind the romanticising and rationalising of futile, disorganised violence so typical of that era lies a harsher recognition that *here* the gospel cannot but be adversarial in respect of existing power; the question is how to handle that adversarial role without colluding with state violence by mirroring it (think of Peru in the last decade) or becoming totally marginal to any imaginable political process at more than local level. What *force* is entailed in realising peace?

Milbank's Augustinianism allows this question to be raised, certainly; and perhaps the important thing is to avoid, as he does, an answer in anything other than negative, regulative or minatory terms. But this issue is a significant part, surely, of his campaign for real ethics; and my point throughout this brief essay has been to press the question of whether the kind of ethic he so evidently wants doesn't require rather more attention to the tragic implications of contingency itself, if the peace it constructs is not to be totalising and ahistorical. This is, in fact, something to which Milbank gives exemplary attention in an essay on Donald MacKinnon[8], which ought to be read in tandem with any pages in *Theology and Social Theory* that might suggest an undifferentiated or timeless model of ecclesial virtue. There too, I think, he says, very obliquely, more of what I would like him to say about the distinctions between divine generation, creation and fall. We can expect further clarification from the work he is evidently now engaged in to do directly with trinitarian and Christological themes. In any case, it will, I hope be clear that these (Lutheran? MacKinnonesque?) queries are designed not to challenge the project, but to ask how fully its own leading themes are enacted in its exposition; how much place is systematically given for the patience that contingency enjoins.

1 'The End of Dialogue', in G. d'Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered. The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions,* New York 1990, pp.174–191.

2 Practically all of these issues are addressed expertly in J.D.Crossan, *The Historical Jesus.The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant,* Edinburgh 1991; see especially pp.422 ff. on the parallelism of Christianity and Mishnaic Judaism.

3 For some reflections on this, see R.Williams, 'Does it make sense to speak of pre-Nicene orthodoxy?' in R.Williams, ed., *The Making of Orthodoxy. Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick,* Cambridge 1989, pp.1–23.

4 It seems fairly clear from the relevant section in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (ed. P. Hodgson, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1985, vol.III, pp. 124 ff.) that the overthrowing of the constructions of meaning typical of Roman society

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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

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