

Radical, orthodox: John Milbank's recovery of theology

by [Lois Malcolm](#) in the [October 25, 2000](#) issue

Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason, by John Milbank

The World Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture, by John Milbank

Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology, by John Milbank

Every once in a while a person comes along who reconfigures a field of study. John Milbank of the University of Virginia, formerly of Cambridge University in England, has done just that in theology, spearheading a movement that has become known as “radical orthodoxy.” At the heart of Milbank’s work is the premise that modernity has ended and with it all systems of truth based on universal reason. Milbank does not lament this end, however, for he sees it as the opportunity for Christian theology to reclaim its own voice.

Milbank’s intent is to overcome what he calls the “pathos” of modern theology, a pathos that lies in its humility. Modern theology, he argues, has surrendered its claim to be comprehensive. Theology has felt it must conform to secular standards of scientific “objectivity.” But with the advent of the postmodern critique of reason—and the recognition that all thought is situated in specific cultural and linguistic systems—theology has an opportunity to reclaim its own premises. Indeed, Christianity’s fundamental doctrine that God created the world out of nothing is consistent with postmodern philosophy: it presupposes that all reality is without substance and is in flux between nothing and infinity. Theology can therefore embrace its historically conditioned nature without negating its claim to speak of transcendent reality. Theology can ground its claims in the terms of its own language of belief.

In calling theology to reclaim its voice as a “master discourse,” Milbank systematically uncovers how the concept of the “secular” emerged. Rather than show how theology makes sense in light of secular philosophy, he aims to show how secular philosophy is a countertheology or an inadequate offshoot of Christian theology. This effort is the burden of his most substantive work to date, *Theology and Social Theory*.

Milbank contends that the secular worldview emerged from two sources: one “heretical” (that is, fundamentally Christian but not in line with orthodox teaching) and one “pagan” (that is, not Christian at all). Both perspectives share a crucial assumption: that reality is constituted by a fundamental conflict or chaos. They differ chiefly in how they respond to this conflict.

The “heretical” version of the secular (evident in, for example, the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes) contends that law is needed to restrain the competition of individuals as they seek dominance over one another. The roots of this view lie in late scholastic nominalism (the doctrine that general terms or abstract concepts exist only as names and have no objective reference) and voluntarism (the doctrine that the will is the fundamental principle of individuals or the universe). The “pagan” version of the secular (exemplified by Machiavelli) takes the form of prudential political management by which a ruler indifferent to moral considerations can achieve and maintain power in the face of conflict. The roots of the “pagan secular” lie in early humanist appeals to ancient Greek or Roman pagan myths, myths which idealized not justice and mercy but strength, beauty and the capacity to outwit one’s opponent.

This analysis of how the modern concept of the “secular” arose from “heretical” and “pagan” roots sets the stage for Milbank’s critique of modern sociology and political and economic theory. Milbank is critical of the way the sociology of religion (in the work of Peter Berger, Robert Bellah and others) reduces theological phenomena to social functions. Milbank also notes that the concept of “society” as used in the sociology of religion has a content similar to that of the theological term “providence”—a point he makes in his “archaeology” of the work of Émile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons and Max Weber.

He offers a similar critique and archaeology of liberation and political theology (focusing on the work of Juan Luis Segundo, Clodovis Boff and Gustavo Gutiérrez), pointing out that the precursors of the liberationists, Hegel and Marx, posit an “original violence” at the center of their “myths” of conflict and progress. Milbank’s critique of liberation and political theology centers on his intriguing analysis of “integralism,” a concept significant in Roman Catholic theology and influential in liberation and political theology.

Integralism presupposes that there is no such thing as “pure nature”—that is, creaturely reality standing apart from God. Rather, all of life is already infused by divine grace. Milbank appropriates this concept after criticizing what he considers to be a false form of it. Specifically, he rejects Karl Rahner’s form of integralism, contending that all it does is “naturalize the supernatural.” While I don’t think this is a fair reading of Rahner, it does bring to light a key difficulty in some forms of liberation and political theology: the tendency to reduce theology to politics.

Rejecting the classical and modern philosophy that presupposes a fundamental chaos or conflict at the heart of reality and which seeks to counter it with a transcendental principle—the rule of reason and law (which he calls a “totalizing reason” or the “violence of legality”)—Milbank offers an alternative theological vision. At the heart of reality is not chaos and violence, but a “sociality of harmonious difference” grounded in God’s creation. He seeks to retrieve Augustine’s insight that despite their many differences, all creatures are related to God and so to one another. In view of this fundamental “sociality,” violence (that is, any form of chaos or conflict) must always be secondary, and “peace” (that is, living in “harmony” with one another) must always be primary.

What is remarkable about Milbank’s proposal is the way it appropriates yet seeks to move beyond two major responses to modernity. The first response is represented by the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. Working in the tradition of Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, MacIntyre has attempted to retrieve, in the face of modernity, notions of ancient virtue and metaphysically secured values. The second response is represented by Jacques Derrida, the deconstructionist philosopher who has championed the insight that language (and therefore thought) has no end other than its own creativity, its own capacity to create yet further “differences.” On the one hand, Milbank appropriates MacIntyre’s focus on virtue to counter Derrida’s stress on the self-grounding character of human thinking and creativity—an approach which, Milbank thinks, can only lead to nihilism. On the other hand, he rejects MacIntyre’s confident belief that reason grasps reality, since it cannot account as Derrida can for the way supposedly objective reason can operate as yet another guise for power.

In presenting Christianity as a response to classical and modern philosophy, Milbank rejects any notion of universal reason or law; this is where he differs from MacIntyre. He contends that all that can be done in response to chaos or conflict is to offer the virtue of nonviolent Christian practice, a practice that cannot be grounded in anything external to its own activity. This “ungrounded” premise links him to Derrida. Nevertheless, his argument for the “sociality of harmonious difference” is clearly different from what he sees as the nihilism of Derrida’s position. Milbank contends that Christian theology can “master” social theory only by “nonmastery,” that is, through the enactment of a peaceful, reconciled social order that lies beyond any supposedly absolute, objective or universal understanding of reason or law.

Milbank has fleshed this position out in essays published in the journal *Modern Theology*, in a volume he has coedited titled *Radical Orthodoxy*, and in a collection of his essays, *The Word Made Strange*. The latter work

offers a view of what systematic theology might look like given his approach.

The organizing aim of *The Word Made Strange* is to trace the theological roots of the turn toward language in contemporary thought while demonstrating the relevance of this turn for reenvisioning classical theological topics (God and creation, God the Son, the incarnation, the Holy Spirit, the Christian life and Christian story). As in *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank opposes the establishment of an autonomous secular terrain independent of theology. Kant is identified as the source of this establishment, though Milbank focuses most of his energy not on the philosopher but on Kant's impact on theologians.

Milbank distances himself from a contemporary postmodern theologian like Jean-Luc Marion because even Marion—working in the tradition of Martin Heidegger—presupposes an autonomous human realm that exists prior to the reception of divine gift. Milbank makes it clear that the “postmodernity” of his own work is not to be linked to the Heideggerian and Nietzschean lines that have so influenced postmodern nihilists. Instead, he appropriates a set of Christian thinkers such as G. B. Vico, J. G. Hamann, J. G. Herder and F. H. Jacobi, who combine analyses of language and culture with trinitarian and christological presuppositions. Milbank draws on these thinkers in order to rethink Augustine's and Aquinas's understanding of how all things are related to one another and to God.

It's important to note that in appropriating the Augustine-Aquinas tradition, Milbank radically redefines Aquinas's “analogy of being,” positing instead an “analogy of creation.” According to Aquinas's analogy of being, every individual creature finds its purpose or true “being” in the pattern that exists in the mind of God. For Milbank, however, it is our ability to “create” that defines us as God's creatures, made in God's image. We might recall here his difference with MacIntyre on the question of a universal pattern of reason and law and his appropriation of Derrida's insight into the self-grounding character of creativity and power.

Especially intriguing is the way Milbank turns to language and aesthetics to rethink classical Christian doctrines. The most radical effort of this kind is his revision of the doctrines of atonement and incarnation. Seeking to avoid simply accepting these doctrines as propositions dropped from heaven, Milbank offers “intrinsic” reasons why they are central to Christian faith by way of an “ecclesial deduction” of their rationale. The incarnation, he argues, makes sense only if Jesus is understood to have founded a new community whose eschatological arrival is identified with the enactment of Christ's divine personhood in ecclesial worship and practice. In turn, the atonement is best understood if the efficaciousness of Jesus's death is defined in relation to the way he inaugurates the political practice of forgiveness as the mode of the church's social being. Milbank's focus on ecclesial practice in interpreting Christ's person and work indicates the significance of his doctrine of the Holy Spirit and specifically his understanding of the Holy Spirit as the church's reception of the Son's testimony about the Father.

In addition to reconstruing classical theological doctrines, Milbank offers a new understanding of ethics and politics. He is especially critical of any mode of ethical reflection that assumes violence and tragedy are part of fundamental reality—a view that puts him at odds with a “realist” like Reinhold Niebuhr.

Overall, Milbank offers a stinging critique of modern theologies, whether liberal or neo-orthodox, for their submission to pagan or heretical traditions, and he proposes a comprehensive and internally coherent alternative. His argument is brilliant, his references wide-ranging, and he maps out a highly persuasive intellectual history. But even those who would affirm the direction of his thought, as I would, may wonder if he overstates his case.

In redefining theological arguments in terms of creativity, he offers a corrective to much modern theology that has so emphasized God's truth and justice that it has tended to slight God's power and beauty. But one wonders whether Christian theology, especially in an age that already measures things according to what “works” or “persuades,” should not measure itself by other criteria. The very theological warrants that undergird Milbank's

argument (his doctrines of the Trinity, creation and the incarnation) have traditionally derived their force from the fact that they reflect the way things “really” are, regardless of whether they “work” or are “appealing.” This is why patristic and medieval theologies employed not only the idea of “beauty” in describing God but “truth” and “goodness” as well. In other words, an argument that relies solely on aesthetic and pragmatic approaches may not do justice to its referents—especially its chief referent, God. And the form of such an argument shows signs of the very nominalist, voluntarist and prudential presuppositions Milbank himself rejected in his critique of the “secular.”

Also, in his desire to “supernaturalize the natural,” Milbank may lose Aquinas’s important distinction between nature and grace, or reason and revelation—or what Luther and Calvin called law and gospel. Even Augustine, who has deeply informed Milbank’s argument, has a place for the ordinary virtues (though they are transformed by the theological virtues) and the temporal city (though it is embedded in the celestial city). These distinctions have classically been maintained to help Christians think through how God’s justice and mercy actually impinge upon complex political, ethical and ecclesial questions.

More important, these distinctions are essential for understanding such distinctly Christian mysteries as the Eucharist and the union of divine and human natures in Christ, since one can fully appreciate the miracle of the incarnation or the sacraments only if one takes seriously the full creatureliness of Jesus’s humanity and the bread and wine used at the Lord’s Supper. Indeed, one can fully appreciate the radicality of God’s grace only if one realizes how radically distinct God is from creatures. Otherwise the relation between God and creatures is not truly a relation but the subsumption of one into another. Just as a healthy marriage is always a union of two individuals (who are distinct and not enmeshed in each other’s identities), so the kind of “sociality” Milbank calls for requires that the “harmonious difference” between people and between them and God entail real differences.

In tandem with this point, major traditions within Christianity have (following Romans 1:18-22) presupposed that there is a universal law that all human beings perceive, a law holding them morally accountable for their actions, regardless of who they are ethnically or even religiously. Indeed, this point, which Christians share theologically with Jews and Muslims, stands in sharp contrast to all forms of contemporary historicism. One can affirm this point without positing an autonomous realm of the “secular” separate from God.

Milbank risks downplaying the reality of sin in the world and in the church, and the fact that God’s justice (which is not a “totalizing reason” or an impersonal “legality,” though it can be perceived as such by sinners) stands in absolute judgment of that sin. Augustine himself offered a complex analysis of distorted loves (*cupiditas*) alongside his discussion of the proper love of God and human beings (*caritas*). One need not be a dualist to recognize the power of sin and the fact that even though we live in the plenitude and power of Christ’s resurrection, we still struggle with what St. Paul called the “old Adam” and God’s universal judgment on him (Rom. 3:23).

Milbank offers a powerful vision of the Christian community as the place Christ’s forgiveness is to be enacted. But as many who have lived and worked with Christian communities know, it is Christ who enables the church to be this kind of place, not the church in and of itself. Even if one holds to a strong sense of the church as a sacrament of Christ’s presence, one must still affirm that it is Christ’s incarnation that enables it to be a sacrament and his atoning death that validates the church’s practice of forgiveness, not the other way around. Finally, it is the Spirit who breathes power into the church’s witness to the Son, a Spirit that always transcends, even as she most intimately indwells, the church. In other words, Milbank’s high ecclesiology would be much stronger if accompanied by an even bolder depiction of Christ’s and the Spirit’s work within and at times against Christian communities.

Reading Milbank is like having a conversation with a very bright new convert who is brimming with energy and a fresh way of seeing things. His theology is the most compelling I have encountered in a long time. But new converts have to face the complexity entailed in being human (even if redeemed) and sinful (even if forgiven). The rise of globalization and technical prowess does not simplify this complexity. Nor does the fact that some of Christian theology's deepest challenges in this century revolve not around secularism but conflicts among Christians and between Christians and those of other faiths.

Nevertheless, Milbank jolts mainstream theology out of complacency, forcefully suggesting that it has been neither robustly Christian nor rigorously intellectual in its engagement with modernity. He challenges us to think hard about what is most ancient and contemporary about being Christian.