The new orthodoxy?

by David S. Cunningham in the November 17, 1999 issue

Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology, edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward

It's difficult to predict which new theological movements will have real staying power and which are destined for the scrap heap. When a group of prominent British academics introduced their 1977 collection *The Myth of God Incarnate* at a press conference, people were stunned and the book sold like hotcakes. Today, it's largely forgotten, difficult even to find. When an obscure Yale medievalist published a 1984 book with the boring title *The Nature of Doctrine*, he staged no press conference. Yet today, "postliberal theology" is almost a household term, and George Lindbeck's book is frequently cited.

What destiny awaits radical orthodoxy? It began quietly, with organizational meetings intended primarily for academics. Its origins lie in John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* (Blackwell, 1990), which argued that a wide variety of supposedly secular discourses (sociology, political science, literary theory and philosophy) operate with implicit theological assumptions. Moreover, these theologies present human beings as isolated individuals, God as largely irrelevant, and our salvation as dependent on correct forms of sociological analysis, psychological therapy and/or political control. Milbank argued that Christian theologians should expose the vicious theologies of these secular discourses and supplant them with virtuous theologies drawn from the biblical and patristic traditions.

The contributors to Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward's book believe that the modern world has recognized but cannot yet admit its lack of meaning. "In its cyberspaces and theme-parks it promotes a materialism which is soulless, aggressive, nonchalant and nihilistic," they argue. The book's essays examine various aspects of modern culture, "resituating" them theologically. Rather than traditionally "religious" topics such as "spirituality" and "morality," the chapters bear titles such as "language," "friendship" and "music." The contributors thus reject both correlational theologies (which too enthusiastically embrace secular disciplines) and neo-orthodox theologies (which fail to engage these disciplines seriously enough).

Radical orthodoxy calls into question the standard dichotomies of "reason and revelation," "spiritual and material," "liberal and conservative."

The key theological term is participation. All things come from God and find their ultimate meaning in God; consequently, human beings find meaning only insofar as they accept God's invitation to participate in the divine life. This participation is not limited to Sunday mornings or even to "religious" activities; it pervades (or should pervade) our entire existence. Therefore, "every discipline must be framed by a theological perspective; otherwise these disciplines will define a zone apart from God, grounded literally in nothing." Discourses about anything-language, the body, perception-can have meaning only if they acknowledge their participation in the transcendent.

In an opening essay on "Knowledge," John Milbank observes that secular philosophy tends to posit forms of knowledge that exclude God. The insights of two 18th-century pietist thinkers, Franz Jacobi and Johann Hamann, demonstrate the hazards of this tendency. Both insist that "no finite thing can be known, not even to any degree, outside its ratio to the infinite," and that "there can be no reason/revelation duality." These claims are illustrated by biblical figures: Pontius Pilate represents a knowledge that is false because faithless (he asks for truth, but won't stay for an answer); the Magi represent a knowledge that is true because faith-based (they wisely seek only because they believe). Knowledge is, ultimately, a matter of faith.

In an essay on "Bodies," Graham Ward reexamines standard biological and anthropological claims about the maleness of Jesus. Ward insists that gendered bodies are not just "given"; they are constructed by means of particular texts. In the biblical texts, "the specificity of Jesus's male body is made unstable from the beginning." Ward traces this claim from the annunciation and birth narratives through the transfiguration to the Last Supper, the crucifixion, the resurrection and, finally, the complete displacement of Jesus's body in the ascension. With each stage, the exact specification of Jesus's "body" becomes less clear, until finally, "the Church is now the body of Christ, broken like the bread, to be food dispersed throughout the world. The final displacement of the gendered body of Jesus Christ . . . is the multi-gendered body of the Church."

In his essay "The City," William T. Cavanaugh observes that the Christian story of salvation insists upon the essential unity of the human race-in spite of humanity's sinful tendencies toward individualism and violence. In contrast, the founding myths

of the modern secular state—in Hobbes, Rousseau and Locke—are all parodies of the Christian story. They describe human beings as individuals who must defend their (private) property against the encroachments of others. This myth can become effective only if it obliterates the Christian story of universal human communion. Because it cannot abide a "transnational" church that might compete for the allegiance of citizens, it redefines religion as inward and private. The consequences of this redefinition continue to haunt us, both in our extreme individualism and in our reliance on violence.

Time and again, Christians who seek to influence (and participate in) the state eventually succumb to the state's version of salvation. As an alternative, Cavanaugh points to the Eucharist as the means by which Christians can escape individualism and violence, turning instead toward true peace and reconciliation.

These three essays, and the other nine in the volume, are complex and difficult; they require patience and stamina. They are intended primarily for academics, and their practical implications are not always obvious. Such implications will have to be teased out and made explicit, by these writers and others.

Fortunately, some of that work is already being done. Routledge is producing a series of books examining such issues as economics and globalization from a "radically orthodox" perspective. Duke University Press has a similar series under the general title "Radical Traditions." The movement bears some resemblance to narrative theology, postliberal theology, and the kinds of cultural critique published by Eerdmans, InterVarsity and others (including the new Brazos Press, which intends to offer "unapologetic theology and theologically based cultural criticism"). Another "radically orthodox" development is the recently initiated Ekklesia Project, which seeks to shift Christian allegiances away from the state and the market and toward the historic trinitarian faith as embodied in concrete worshiping communities.

That radical orthodoxy's trinity of founder/editors, all Cambridge theologians, are now dispersed may be symbolic of the movement's future. Its cohesion may fade, even as its influence spreads. The book may not sell well, but the movement, under many names, seems likely to flourish and to deepen the practices of trinitarian worship, eucharistic communion, unabashed evangelism and faithful theological study.