Re-envisioning Radical Orthodoxy: More Radical, Less Orthodox

Extended Essay – World Religions

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ABSTRACT

The question proposed by this investigation is one of tolerance; specifically, is radically orthodox theology capable of tolerance towards other religious narratives? Radical orthodoxy is a postmodern and poststructuralist sensibility with Christianity launched and to some extent championed by John Milbank. The scope of the investigation is a comparison between the work of Milbank and Graham Ward in regards to the level of tolerance of their relative interpretations of radical orthodoxy, drawing heavily on the criticism leveled by Frank Burch Brown. Though Milbank created the radical orthodoxy sensibility, he lost touch with its postmodern roots early on and was surpassed by other members of his sensibility, particularly Graham Ward. While Milbank continually ignores other faiths and preaches a form of imperial Christianity that appears on the threshold of a new Christendom, Ward addresses other theological discourses head on, developing a more radical theology that establishes a greater level of tolerance of those of other faiths. Ward's radicalism is based on a theology of analogical relations between people of the city, people of different faiths, equally invested. Although virtually no religion can accept other religions as true, they can and should accept the possibility of such an actuality, and based on the relative nature of postmodern truth, radical orthodoxy ought to be especially capable of accepting the possibility that other religious narratives are at least equally, if not more, accurate. However, Milbank's radical orthodoxy is consumed by a desire to proclaim Christianity as the one ultimate Truth, a desire belied by Graham Ward's more radically postmodern interpretation. While Milbank invented radical orthodoxy, Graham Ward's tolerant strain of it is more in accordance with its original intent and the reality of relations outside of faith communities. Therefore, radical orthodoxy, in Ward's understanding, is tolerant of other religious narratives.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent American politics has become a duel between the "Christian Right," a set of primarily evangelical Christian sects that have defined the political base of the current administration, and the "Atheist Left," a group of mostly New England liberals who argue for an absolute separation of the church and state nearly to the point of suggesting atheist government (Vanita; Coulter 17). In light of the rapid divergence of these political ideologies, scholars have begun to search for principles and beliefs that can break down the radicalizing force of these two clashing principles. A major element in the search for compromise has been a theological one – exploring Christianity in a manner that allows it to transcend a purely conservative political perspective. The Christian Left offers a growing alternative to traditionally conservative Christian political theory.

A prominent member of the politically liberal Christian faction is radical orthodoxy, a predominantly British and Canadian theological sensibility based in large part on French postmodern and poststructuralist philosophers. In addition to a base in poststructuralist French philosophers, radically orthodox theologians also draw heavily on the work of several theologians- both recent and early. Radical orthodoxy, the loose amalgamation of theological principles, was first established in the seminal text, *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, a compilation of essays edited by John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock (1). Often referred to as a movement for convenience, it is not truly a movement, instead it is a set of diverse theological notions that adhere to ideas posed in Milbank, Ward, and Pickstock's *Radical Orthodoxy* that is most accurately termed a theological sensibility. Drawing heavily on the work of Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, radical orthodoxy undertakes the project of applying poststructuralist critiques of liberal modernity to the modernist treatment of theology, using recent theologians on the lines of de Lubac and von Balthasar (Milbank, Ward, and Pickstock).

Radical orthodoxy plays host to a multitude of tenets, criticizing secular interpretations of art, music, architecture, the written word, and the state. However, a full discourse on the creed of radical orthodoxy is far outside the scope of this investigation. In fact, radical orthodoxy can be regarded as a criticism of secular modernity, a lens through which a position on any issue may be determined, established as such by Milbank, Ward, and Pickstock in their introduction to *Radical Orthodoxy*:

> The present collection of essays attempts to reclaim the world by situating its concerns and activities within a theological framework. Not simply returning in nostalgia to the premodern, it visits sites in which secularism has invested heavily … and resituates them from a Christian standpoint; that is, in terms of the Trinity, Christology, the Church and the Eucharist. What emerges is a contemporary theological project made possible by the self-conscious superficiality of today's secularism. For this new project regards the nihilistic drift of postmodernism (which nonetheless has roots in the outset of modernity) as a supreme opportunity. It does not, like liberal theology, transcendentalist theology and even certain styles of neo-orthodoxy, seek in the face of this drift to shore up universal accounts of immanent human value (humanism) nor defenses of supposedly objective reason. But nor does it indulge, like so many, in the pretence of a baptism of nihilism in the name of a misconstrued 'negative theology'. Instead, in the face of the secular demise of truth, it seeks to reconfigure theological truth. The latter may indeed hover close to nihilism, since it, also, refuses a reduction of the indeterminate. Yet what finally distances it from nihilism is its proposal of the rational possibility, and the faithfully perceived actuality, of an indeterminacy that

is not impersonal chaos but infinite interpersonal harmonious order, in which time participates. (2)

While it engages the fundamental assumptions of nihilism, humanism, and even the nebulous postmodernism, radical orthodoxy cannot and should not be regarded as a philosophic sensibility. To put radical orthodoxy in a World Religions context is crucial because to do otherwise be contradictory to its own intent. Conor Cunningham writes:

> …if metaphysics (the science of Being) is to be metaphysical it must disassociate itself from philosophy and continually demand theological discourse on the question of Being. Metaphysics must escape philosophy because the latter's forms of explanation will violate each question supposedly asked. It must also demand theological discourse on the question of Being because only theology, which appeals to transcendence, can offer a form of explanation that will escape the aporias of philosophical explanation. (64)

Because of the closely held belief that theology offers unique forms of discourse that can avoid nihilism in ways that philosophy simply cannot, it would be insensitive to the principles of radical orthodoxy, which is defined in opposition to the principle of nihilism, to treat it as philosophy.

If it is to be treated as theology, radical orthodoxy is placed in the difficult position of justifying the contradiction implicit even in its title, between the radical shift of liberal theology and the strict orthodoxy of Christendom. In fact, the ultimate test of radical orthodoxy is its ability to overcome its founding contradiction, its own self-inconsistency. The question at hand, therefore, is whether radical orthodoxy is self consistent. More explicitly stated: can radically

orthodox theology accept radical religious tolerance, or is its orthodox interpretation of Christian theology necessarily exclusionary of other religious practices?

Before *Radical Orthodoxy* was published, Milbank, its predominant theologian, categorized himself as a "postmodern critical Augustinian" (Milbank 225). Such a contradiction is reflective of those carried over into his later theological writings, emphasized by his relative refusal to mention any positive aspect of any other religion in his writings (Brown 47). Milbank's interpretation of radical orthodoxy is inconsistent with the ability of a non-Christian to find any element of salvation, however, others, specifically Graham Ward, adopt a more open ended view that serves to more accurately reflect the majority of radical orthodoxy. Such views allow a better balance between the radical and the orthodox that permits radically orthodox theologians to transcend the totalitarian bent of sheer orthodoxy.

BODY

John Milbank established the theological foundations of radical orthodoxy in his essay, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism" and his book *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. The criticism of modern religion's acceptance of secular reason, and even to some extent acceptance of a secular sphere of politics and life, which is the central thread of radical orthodoxy, is commonplace throughout Milbank's work. He continued to lead the sensibility of radical orthodoxy, coining the term when he edited *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* with Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, and contributing a chapter in addition to coauthoring the introduction. Frank Burch Brown writes in his 2002 essay, "Radical Orthodoxy and the Religions of Others," that Milbank is "the thinker most representative of radical orthodoxy" (47). This is certainly true to the extent that Milbank is the most original thinker of radical orthodoxy, having paved the way for others in the sensibility. However, radical orthodoxy has broadened, and at the very least diversified to the extent that no one person can any longer be categorized as the leader. Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward each have an equally viable claim to leadership of the sensibility based in the specific disciplines to which they have chosen to apply it, giving any potential adherent a choice of strains of radical orthodoxy (Allen 221).

Milbank's particular strain of Radical Orthodoxy tends more towards orthodoxy than many of the other authors of the sensibility, particularly Graham Ward. In fact, Milbank has a tendency to regard religions outside the Judeo-Christian tradition as mere mythology, forms of paganism which verge on nihilism (Brown 47-48). He even goes so far as to attack Judaism, explicitly stating "Jesus reveals that even Jewish law and society is founded upon exclusion and expulsion" (Milbank, qtd in Brown 49). Even when he does not venture to assail other religions, Milbank has an overwhelming tendency to ignore them. Milbank never once explains how it

might be possible to achieve salvation or justice in some other religious tradition (Brown 49).

Brown elaborates, taking the example of Islam:

> Milbank could have ventured to consider varieties of God-given faith, as
> illumined in different religions. He could have speculated on how Muslim faith in
> God's will as both manifest and hidden in the infinitely varied yet beautiful
> design for the world may have inspired Islamic culture's pursuit of abstract visual
> harmonies as well as a love of algebra and geometry. Islam, after all, has never
> accepted the idea of a truly secular science or art. What could be more radically
> orthodox, in that sense? (52)

Milbank, Pickstock and Ward explicitly establish a binary state of knowledge in their

introduction to *Radical Orthodoxy*, stating, "it is indeed for radical orthodoxy an either/or:

philosophy (Western or Eastern) as a purely autonomous discipline, or theology: Herod or the

magi, Pilate or the God-man" (23-24, Brown 52) This either/or of philosophy versus theology is

not meant in the broad sense of the pursuit of knowledge versus the study of religion or god – it

is put forth unequivocally as the either/or between nihilism and Christ. Even the examples given

to express the contradiction between philosophy and theology are from the Christian tradition,

and those examples considered representative of philosophy are of the greatest evil doers –

Herod and Pilate. By failing to recognize any common ground between philosophy and

theology, Milbank et al essentially state that there is no non-Christian worldview capable of a

cohesive explanation that can stand up to the "depth" of reality and overcome the nihilism

attributed to philosophy (Brown 52).

Milbank continually refuses to address the question of how his theories of radical

orthodoxy play out in regards to other religions – a crucial question given his and other radically

orthodox author's tendencies to criticize the state, especially the modern liberal democracy, and its claims to religious pluralism. Given that criticism of the separation of church and state common throughout the works of radical orthodoxy, it is paramount that Milbank address the problem of a New Christendom (Cavanaugh 190-191). Milbank's continual refusal to recognize the possibility of other viable religious explanations of meaning ultimately hampers the deployment of radical orthodoxy by those less orthodox. Frank Burch Brown expands:

> It should have been relatively easy for Milbank to envision how multiple narratives can have similar pragmatic consequences for peace-making, supporting comparably desirable (if different) alternatives to nihilism. He could easily have acknowledged how even the Christian narrative will inevitably play out very differently in different settings, and sometimes not altogether peacefully. In short, were he not driven by his prior orthodox ideology, Milbank would have every reason to adopt some sort of critical pluralism in which Christianity, however special, distinctive, or even in some sense "final," could have religious allies of a sort: partners in the desire for, and discernment of, sacred harmonies. Milbank could then have acknowledged God's resourcefulness in working with multiple stories and histories capable of speaking differently, but in dialogue, from the depths. But to acknowledge that would have required a less orthodox and still more radical theology. (53)

The ultimate disappointment of Brown's assessment of radical orthodoxy is his refusal to look beyond Milbank's roll in the sensibility. Other authors of radical orthodoxy, especially Graham Ward, offer slightly different treatments of the material that justify and legitimize alternative searches for salvation and alternative answers to the supposed nihilism of philosophy (Allen

221). Milbank's refusal to accept alternative narratives of spirituality "seems to go against some of radical orthodoxy's most distinctive claims" (Allen 221). In its quest to distance itself from nihilism by proposing "an indeterminacy that is not impersonal chaos but infinite interpersonal harmonious order," Milbank's theology ignores other discourses of "infinite interpersonal harmonious order" and fails to articulate a narrative capable of withstanding attack from without (Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward 2).

Virtually the sole mention by Milbank of other religions by name is during an interview with Time Magazine, in which he states that members of other faiths are likely to reject his notions of Christian superiority (Van Biema). However, there are radically orthodox alternatives to John Milbank who are more accepting of some form of religious pluralism, the most prominent example being that of Graham Ward. In his major tome *Cities of God*, Ward adopts an account of meaning that is explicitly Christian, but defines and expresses his narrative as one of analogy. He is also willing to address the claims of Christian imperialism leveled against radical orthodoxy. Ward addresses the criticism that radical orthodoxy is attempting to establish a new Christendom by reaffirming its postmodern roots – explicitly recognizing that the era of Christendom is past, but also suggesting that the era of humanistic religious pluralism has departed. Ward offers, "We have moved beyond pluralism because there is no view from no where, no objective knowledge; the view from no where is itself a cultural ideology - often Western, white, and male" (236-237). His interpretation of religious pluralism is one that suggests pluralism as the principle that every religion and theology is attempting to describe the one universal truth, which one could understand upon the achievement of sufficient objectivity. Ward recognizes this, accurately, as a notion that is itself imperialist in that it attempts to proliferate the concept that there is a single Truth to whose description all religions ought to

aspire. By reinforcing the postmodern notion that there is no absolute truth, only many narratives of truth, Ward is able to reposition Christian theological truth in a manner that is not imperial in regards to other religious traditions, but can instead engage in mutual analogical discourse (Ward 237). However, Ward is not necessarily criticizing the concept that diverse and divergent religious practice ought to be allowed. Instead, he criticizes the belief that each religion must convey some part of a universal truth, for he recognizes, in the postmodern tradition, that there is no religion that is not cultural, no truth that is not relative, and that therefore, we ought not to treat divergent theologies as similar.

Allen notes that Ward is among "the more recent writers [who] seem to know better" than to disregard alternative claims of meaning or salvation, and in that claim he is absolutely correct (221). In addition to being the sole leader of radical orthodoxy to speak about its relationship to other religions, Ward also establishes a framework for radical orthodoxy to function in regards to other faiths. Ward makes extensive reference to Saint Thomas Aquinas' theory of analogy – a medieval linguistic principle based on problems with comparing differing theological accounts of God (Ashworth, Ward 236, 257). He argues that only an analogical worldview which simultaneously defines belief in terms of and in opposition to other beliefs can end the overwhelming growth of nihilism (Ward 257-258).

While Ward's account is explicitly Christian, he acknowledges the possibility, and indeed the actuality, of other analogical worldviews – "Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist… They have different resources for that construction which means that they will construct them differently. But in analogy, difference is only different because it is in relation to. As we have seen, difference cannot be hypostasised (and commodified) without falling into indifference" (257-258). The nature of analogy emphasizes the relationship of divergent philosophies over their

divergence, preventing the development of any solid differentiating boundaries (Ward 258). This suggests the downfall of Christendom due to its refusal to recognize the interconnectedness of theologies and social bodies (Ward 258).

Ward extends and broadens Augustine's argument that the body of Christ occurs through the social and political bodies that take part in the Eucharist (258). The Christological corpus making up the Christian church does not exist in a vacuum – its members partake of other social and political organizations, and in doing so form interactions with members of other faiths, equally confident and faithful (Ward 259). Ward effectively expands Aquinas' theory of analogy to explain interpersonal relationships, stating:

> The city is a collocation of shifting networks of relations in which I live with my
> Jewish neighbour, I eat with my Muslim friend, I listen with the Quaker who sits
> and listens with me, and I slowly learn about the religions of South Asia, a world I
> approach cautiously through a critical selfawareness facilitated by postcolonial
> theorists. I can and do remain a Christian, but my body is continually mapped
> onto other bodies; bodies which have no theological affiliations (political groups,
> cinema clubs, community welfare programmes) and bodies that are involved in
> practices of faithful living in theologies not my own. (259)

Ward concludes that, based on both Augustinian and postmodern theology, Christians must "suspend judgement" in regards to other faiths (259).

This is the crucially radical revelation of radical orthodoxy: the suspension of judgement in light of conflict with other beliefs. Ward writes:

> We must suspend our judgement about those who pursue love, mercy, justice, and
> righteousness in other practices, in other communities, with other liturgies and

> symbolic exchanges. We must sink ourselves deeper into our own traditions, meditating upon the grammar of the faith we live, the Scriptures that embody that grammar, and we must not be afraid that others do things differently… (259)

Only in the suspension of judgment can one fully develop a relationship with members of other faiths, and a deepened understanding of one's own faith. By living one's own traditions and beliefs, the narrative of theology becomes meaningful, and is opened up for discourse from others.

The fact that Ward ultimately accepts postmodernism to be a powerful source of theological understanding is of paramount importance in comprehending radical orthodoxy. His realization that, "Our certainties are persuasions; our facts are selections from the data available; our dogmatisms speak more about our fears than our aspirations," reflects the instability and uncertainty of all knowledge, theological or otherwise, and the simultaneous opening up of new discursive spaces by that ambiguity in the form of bearing witness (Ward 260). Ward concludes that:

> There is no room for Christian imperialism; crusades in the name of the triune love misconceive the kenosis of that love. That love is poured out eternally *on behalf of* not *against.* It works alongside, transfiguring the ordinary, transforming the mundane. It persuades; it does not coerce. It bears witness, and ultimately that is what we all do. Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, atheist, agnostic - we each bear witness to that which we believe. The judgment of the witness lies elsewhere. (260)

John Milbank's work reflects no such qualms about making value judgements in regards to other theologies, or about engaging in imperialist forms of Christianity. His theology leans heavily

towards the orthodox rather than the radical; while he was the first scholar to really apply principles of postmodernism to theology, he never transcended his extreme orthodoxy. Milbank fails even to respond to charges of imperialism in regards to other religions.

Frank Burch Brown's analysis of Milbank remains accurate; however, his failure to look beyond Milbank's work at that of other radically orthodox theologians dooms his ultimate criticism of radical orthodoxy. Brown suggests that Milbank ought to comprehend the possibility of multiple narratives having the same peaceful impact as alternatives to nihilism, and while Milbank refuses to do so, Graham Ward does, explicitly, in *Cities of God* (Brown 53). Milbank also fails to acknowledge the possibility of different Christian narratives, treating his own as paramount, whereas Graham Ward recognizes and utilizes the fact that Christianity will consistently play host to different accounts of meaning to establish a theology in analogy (Brown 53, Ward 257). If Milbank were able to transcend the orthodoxy of his tradition, radical orthodoxy would be able to adopt "some sort of critical pluralism" (Brown 53). However, there is no evidence to indicate that Milbank's theology will undergo the necessary shift; instead radically orthodox theologians should begin to draw more heavily on the work of Graham Ward, whose theology of analogy is sufficiently radical to uphold radical orthodoxy. Ward has already established the "less orthodox and still more radical theology" which Brown deems necessary (53).

In the final pages of *Cities of God*, Graham Ward writes, "The theologian's task is to keep alive the vision of better things - of justice, salvation and the common good - and work to clarify the world-view conducive to the promotion of those things" (260). Ward constructs an analogical worldview capable of promoting the "vision of better things" outside the bounds of Milbank' Christianity. Milbank's radical orthodoxy is in many ways an attempt to launch a new

Christendom, and his failure to recognize it as such and to combat that Christian imperialism is the final downfall of his strain of radical orthodoxy. However, the theological basis of radical orthodoxy is strong, and its diverse set of believers gives it vitality. While Milbank's strain of radical orthodoxy cannot meet the demands placed upon it by the city – the interaction between Christians and members of other faiths. Ward's interpretation is able to uphold and overcome this demand, leaving adherents simultaneously radical and orthodox – radical in their pluralistic acceptance of other theological, and even Christological, narratives and willingness to engage in an ever-deepening discussion with those who offer other theological narratives, and orthodox in their demands of deepening faith in a personal Christological narrative.

CONCLUSION

Radical orthodoxy is, without a doubt, an exclusive theological principle – one cannot be simultaneously radically orthodox and a member of some non-Christian religion. However, contrary to the implicit claims of John Milbank, radical orthodoxy need not treat other religious principles with enmity. Its radicalism is based in the principles of postmodernism that permit it to be deployed beyond the bounds of a new Christendom. Milbank too easily abandons the postmodern principles upon which he founded radical orthodoxy in favor of traditional Christian orthodoxy. However, Graham Ward's strain of radical orthodoxy permits a new liberal pluralism based upon analogical relations rather than "neo-Kantian" presuppositions about one eternal Truth. Ward's religious pluralism and tolerance overcomes the bounds of Milbank's theology to establish a radical orthodoxy that is tolerant of life in the terrestrial city – a life surrounded by narratives that are divergent, and yet similar in analogy. While the practice of radical orthodoxy is mutually exclusive with that of other religious practices, Graham Ward's radical form of radical orthodoxy permits and recognizes other viable forms of discourse to establish peace and overcome nihilism. Not only is Ward's interpretation of radical orthodoxy more open and tolerant, it is also superior to Milbank's interpretation given its own self consistency, for Milbank's theology ultimately cannot uphold its exclusion of other religious practices or attempts at salvation. The remaining question is largely societal: to what extent will followers of radical orthodoxy adopt this analysis and in turn look to Ward rather that Milbank in his acceptance of divergent narratives?

Ward is the primary radically orthodox theologian of the city, and as such is particularly aware of the interactions that take place therein. His background in the urban interactions between people forces him, more than more orthodox theologians like Milbank, to accept alternative narratives of meaning and salvation. Ward's conclusion is in accord with the basic

principles of radical orthodoxy, especially the postmodern realization of relativism rather than universalism. Milbank's Christian universalism falls into the trap of a new Christendom, a trap that can ultimately only be escaped by radical orthodoxy's postmodern relativist roots – roots that Graham Ward rightly embraces. Only a general acceptance of Ward's interpretation of radical orthodoxy over Milbank's by radical orthodoxy's adherents will permit the continued existence of a theology that is truly radical, in addition to being orthodox.

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