

**Radical Orthodoxy's *Poiēsis*:  
Ideological Historiography and Anti-Modern Polemic**

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*Abstract.* For Radical Orthodoxy participatory *poiēsis* is the only form of authentic postmodern theology and determines its dependence upon, as well as the character of, its narrative of the history of philosophy. This article endeavors to display how the polemical anti-modernism of the movement results in a disregard for the disciplines of scholarship, so that ideological fables about our cultural history pass for theology. Claiming to revive Christian Platonism (of a theurgic Neoplatonic kind), because of the Radical Orthodox antipathy to philosophy, its assertions cannot be proven rationally either in principle or in fact, and its followers are reduced to accepting its stories on the authority of their tellers. The moral and rational disciplines are replaced with a postmodern incarnational neo-Neoplatonism in which the First Principle and sensual life are immediately united, without the mediation of soul or mind. With this disappearance of *theoria*, surrender to the genuinely other, or even attentive listening, become impossible.

I.

*Poiēsis: Christian and Postmodern.* For Radical Orthodoxy authentic contemporary theology is a postmodern *poiēsis*. John Milbank, the founding father of the school, connects *poiēsis* and postmodern Christianity:

If art as redemption ... is modernity's own antidote to modernity, then *poesis* may be the key ... to a postmodern theology. *Poesis* ... is an integral aspect of Christian practice and redemption. Its work is the ceaseless re-narrating and "explaining" of human history under the sign of the cross.<sup>1</sup>

He also tells us:

[P]ractice cannot claim to "know" the finality of what it treats as final ... We know what we want to know, and although all desiring is an "informed"

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<sup>1</sup> John Milbank, "A Critique of the Theology of the Right," in idem, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 7–35, at 32.

desiring, desire shapes truth beyond the immanent implications of any logical order, so rendering the Christian *logos* a continuous product as well as a process of “art.”<sup>2</sup>

The end of modernity ... means the end of a single system of truth based on universal reason, which tells us what reality is like. 2. [T]heology ... no longer has to measure up to accepted secular standards of scientific truth or normative rationality ... 4. ... the point is not to “represent” ... externality, but just to join in its occurrence, not to know, but to intervene, originate.<sup>3</sup>

Radical Orthodoxy is the most controversial and influential British theological development in a generation. It presents itself as a radical subversion of secularity and a strident defence of Christian orthodoxy. Because it claims that theology has overcome and can absorb philosophy, it attracts not only those rejecting liberal theology in particular, but also those more generally refusing the modern illusion of an “objective” rationality supposing itself to exist in separation from history, tradition, and *praxis*. The fundamental document is Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*,<sup>4</sup> published in 1990. *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, a collection of essays edited by Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock, published in 1999, identifies itself as the “Cambridge collection.”<sup>5</sup> The authors tell us that they are British and American Anglicans “of a High Church persuasion” and Roman Catholics. *Radical Orthodoxy? A Catholic Inquiry*, which appeared in 2000, is devoted to exchanges with Roman Catholics, but some of the Catholic criticism is very sharp indeed.<sup>6</sup> In North America, the primary interest of Radical Orthodoxy seems to be with evangelicals and is growing. The embrace is to a considerable degree reciprocal.<sup>7</sup>

Following his *Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of Incarnation*, which was published in the Routledge Radical Orthodoxy Series,<sup>8</sup> the young Canadian evangelical, James K. A. Smith, now in the Philosophy Department of Calvin College, has brought

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<sup>2</sup> John Milbank, “‘Postmodern Critical Augustinianism’: A Short *Summa* in Forty-Two Responses to Unasked Questions,” *Modern Theology* 7 (1991): 225–37, at 231–5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 225–6.

<sup>4</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), Acknowledgments.

<sup>6</sup> *Radical Orthodoxy? A Catholic Inquiry*, ed. Laurence Paul Hemming (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> For the evangelicals see James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 27. For Radical Orthodoxy, see John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*, (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of Incarnation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

out *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology*, which is accompanied by a foreword by John Milbank. Milbank attests that “Smith’s evangelical-Dooyeweerdian reception of RO tends to bear out RO’s claim that it is, indeed, an ecumenical theology that can speak to several different Christian communities.”<sup>9</sup> He goes on to affirm that “the Dutch Calvinist tradition from Kuyper to Dooyeweerd ... accentuated the latent catholicity of the Reformed tradition” and that there is “much common ground with RO.”<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, Milbank has significant reservations regarding the Dutch Calvinist tradition and reasserts against Smith’s criticisms Radical Orthodoxy’s taking up of Iamblichan-Proclean Neoplatonism in a “theurgic liturgical turn.”<sup>11</sup> Smith and Jens Zimmerman, professor in English literature at Trinity Western University in British Columbia, a private evangelical university, when commenting on earlier versions of this paper, have reaffirmed their enthusiasm for the hermeneutical sophistication of Radical Orthodoxy and their opposition to giving philosophical reason a substantial content or proper integrity. I shall take account of their comments as well as of the brilliantly critical article in the July 2004 issue of *Modern Theology* by Paul D. Janz, until recently a member of the Department of Philosophy at Trinity Western, entitled “Radical Orthodoxy and the New Culture of Obscurantism.”<sup>12</sup>

In such an “ecumenical” context—Reformed and Catholic, pagan and Christian—we may appropriately begin by thinking generally, with reference to Radical Orthodoxy, about the connections between the free creativity or making that the Greeks called *poiēsis*, on the one hand, and Christianity on the other. The divine-human poetics essential to Christianity, and, *mutatis mutandis*, to religion generally, are liturgy, scripture, and community.

The first *poiēsis* is liturgy—roughly the prayer of the religious community, which embraces everything from the dance of cultic movement, sacraments, hymns, and music to architecture, together with the verbal prose and poetry that we ordinarily associate with worship. For Radical Orthodoxy, liturgy is taken in the widest possible sense. Indeed, according to Milbank, “it is important to insist that all art is paradigmatically liturgy.”<sup>13</sup> It thus becomes the alpha and omega. Milbank affirms that “in order to invoke God and in order for God to be first present to us at all, we must first imaginatively shape God at the point that is the very consummation in God’s own shaping work.”<sup>14</sup> In this context, he refers to Catherine Pickstock’s *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, where liturgical *poiēsis* rescues theory and

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<sup>9</sup> Milbank, “Foreword,” in Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Paul D. Janz, “Radical Orthodoxy and the New Culture of Obscurantism,” *Modern Theology* 20 (2004): 362–405.

<sup>13</sup> Milbank, “Foreword,” in Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 16.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

language from nihilism. She celebrates Plato as leading “dialogue ... *into* doxology, which for Plato is our principal human function and language’s only possibility of restoration.”<sup>15</sup> Milbank in turn assimilates Augustine and a self-reflexive *theoria* to theurgic Neoplatonism by making liturgy total; thus, he writes: “Augustine ... places the soul within the cosmos and in the *Confessions* finally realises his own selfhood through losing it in cosmic liturgy.”<sup>16</sup> Cult, above all the Eucharist, is primary both insofar as it consists in particular acts and insofar as it shows and constitutes the universe. Milbank wrote recently about his theurgic Neoplatonism: this “metaphysics of the participation of the poetic at once envisages all true poesis as liturgy, and at the same time must itself be contingent temporal performance as well as an expression of *theoria*.”<sup>17</sup>

The second fundamental Christian *poiēsis* is the storytelling that is reflected in, but by no means confined to, what is called Holy Scripture; it includes the stories of the saints and recounts the revelation that continues to create the Church. Whereas evangelicals are uncomfortable with the Anglo-Catholic priority that Radical Orthodoxy accords to liturgical *poiēsis*,<sup>18</sup> Jens Zimmerman writes of the “hermeneutical ontology” espoused by Graham Ward: “Ward merely restates the basic incontrovertible hermeneutic premise Heidegger established and Gadamer made famous in his *Truth and Method*: truth is always through tradition in history through language.”<sup>19</sup> For him, by its insistence on a participatory and hermeneutical ontology, Radical Orthodoxy has hold of what the Incarnation means for truth. Zimmerman writes: “Radical Orthodoxy insists rightly on the interpretative nature of all human knowledge: it is the hermeneutical view of truth which explains the sustained development and dominance of *poiēsis* in the program of Radical Orthodoxy.”<sup>20</sup>

The third fundamental divine-human *poiēsis* consists in making and being the Church, which is everything from entrance into, life in, and extension of the sacred community; the care it gives to its members, to humanity, and to the world as the steward of God’s reign; and the projection of its appropriate political communities both as the secularization of the Church and as its antipode. Milbank tells us that the “event of reconciliation must be not merely believed in, but actively realized as the existence of

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<sup>15</sup> Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 43.

<sup>16</sup> Milbank, “Intensities,” *Modern Theology* 15 (1999): 445–97, at 497 n. 142. “Intensities” is, in part, a response to my “*Theoria versus Poiēsis*” in the same issue.

<sup>17</sup> Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, x.

<sup>18</sup> See Jens Zimmerman, “Radical Orthodoxy: A Reformed Appraisal,” *Canadian Evangelical Review* 26–27 (Spring 2004): 65–90, at 81. This is a response to my “Poets tell many a Lie’: Radical Orthodoxy’s Poetic Histories,” published in the same issue of this journal.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

a community in which mere 'self-immediacy' is infinitely surpassed."<sup>21</sup> Further, "if Christians ask, what is God like? then they can only point to our 'response' to God in the formation of community. The community is what God is like."<sup>22</sup>

By way of his Christianized Platonic ontology of participation, Milbank grounds *poiēsis* theologically. He explains:

Participation can be extended also to language, history and culture: the whole realm of human making. Not only do being and knowledge participate in a God who is and comprehends; also human making participates in a God who is infinite poetic utterance: the second person of the Trinity. Thus when we contingently but authentically make things and reshape ourselves through time, we are not estranged from the eternal, but enter further into its recesses by what is for us the only possible route.<sup>23</sup>

*Poiēsis* is, thus, ordinary religious activity, perhaps even the essential character of religious life generally and of Christian life particularly. Despite the hyperbole, Radical Orthodoxy is not wrong to see patristic and medieval Christian writers representing the life of the Church as poetic in the ways that I have listed. In this regard, Radical Orthodoxy represents the reassertion in the present circumstances of what is normal. As such it should be uncontroversial.

Radical Orthodoxy, however, is not uncontroversial. This is so because an anti-modern polemic, which Janz calls anti-rational and anti-subject,<sup>24</sup> is essential to its reassertion of *poiēsis*. The root of this polemic is an understanding of modernity that is generally Nietzschean and Heideggerian. This analysis necessitates that participatory *poiēsis* be the "only possible route" into the eternal and determines its character.

Within the metaphysics of the will to power that, for Heidegger, constructs modernity and concluded metaphysics as a whole, the West witnessed the death of God, and either endeavored to annihilate religion and the gods as a consequence, or ushered them to the ineffectual margins. Heidegger assumes this death, witnesses to it, and seeks in *poiēsis* a way beyond it.<sup>25</sup> Radical Orthodoxy is a strident re-assertion of an autonomous poetic theology against that death. Yet in my view, the analysis out of which it operates is outdated. In fact, we now face the survival of both religion and the gods, and in charismatic, politicised, and fundamentalist religious movements around

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<sup>21</sup> Milbank, "The Second Difference," in idem, *The Word Made Strange*, 171–93, at 184.

<sup>22</sup> Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism," 228.

<sup>23</sup> Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, ix.

<sup>24</sup> Janz, "Radical Orthodoxy," 363.

<sup>25</sup> See Laurence Paul Hemming, *Heidegger's Atheism: The Refusal of a Theological Voice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 20, 41–73, and Wayne J. Hankey, "Why Heidegger's 'History' of Metaphysics is Dead," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 78 (2004): 425–43, at 442–3.

the globe, we witness the return of gods who have immunized themselves from the rationality of the old metaphysics and from the modern criticism which had enfeebled them. Reason has lost its power against what is often hideous strength. The triumph of atheism or enlightenment which both Marxist and progressive capitalist anticipated in the twentieth-century has turned into a rout. As a result, I agree with Radical Orthodoxy that we must ask whether it is religion or rather modernity itself that is the more embattled. However, regarding from a postmodern perspective the re-assertion of religion, we are bound to ask whether the mixture of polemical arrogance and defensiveness that so mutilates Radical Orthodoxy is the right reaction of philosophical theology to the present.

## II.

*Modernity, Postmodernity, and the Retrieval of the Past.* The key to Radical Orthodoxy is an analysis of modernity, an opposition to it, and a conviction that we are postmodern. Despite repeated assertions that it refuses dualisms, in a series of binary oppositions, Radical Orthodoxy reduces modernity to *theoria* versus *poiēsis*, substance versus *praxis*, the spatial versus the temporal, closed objectifying subjectivity versus self-transcendent openness, philosophy as metaphysics versus theology, secular humanism versus divinity, the immanent versus the transcendent, isolated individualism versus community, mind versus body, and so forth. For the movement, the pre-modern is retrieved within the postmodern overcoming of modernity. Radical Orthodoxy claims to retrieve pre-modern integrity in such a way as to gain for itself both sides of what it accuses modernity of opposing. What it makes modernity be is essential to the project.

Radical Orthodoxy operates as if the law of non-contradiction did not apply to it. Nothing need be refused. It supposes that it has discovered a strategy by which philosophy is reduced to nothing, and then retrieved as participatory ontology and Neoplatonic metaphysics. By a postmodern Christianization, Platonism undergoes a metamorphosis in which all its dualisms disappear. The leading trio tells us that “the modern bastard dualisms” are now transcended by their Anglo-Catholic Affirming Catholicism.<sup>26</sup> Milbank asserts:

If all that “is” is good and true, then no positive reality can be false as a “mistake,” or as “non-correspondence,” but only false as deficient presence, embodying the short-fall of inadequate desire. Now desire, not Greek “knowledge” mediates to us reality.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism,” §37, 234.

This radicalized romantic freedom in which all the dualities and oppositions, both of modern and pre-modern forms, have been overcome makes discussion with Radical Orthodoxy almost impossible—and in principle its adherents do refuse all dialogue. They regard themselves as having already embraced whatever is objected against them.

The retrieval of the pre-modern against modernity makes historical narrative essential to Radical Orthodoxy—indeed, as we shall see, re-narrating history is the only way it can establish the authority of its orthodoxy. In its need to retell the story of the past and in the manner in which it addresses this task, we face its greatest problem. Part of what it wants to escape in the modern is what it (along with Nietzsche) perceives as rational objectification by critical scholarship of our past, an alienation by which what is human becomes inhuman. Thus the telling of stories and hermeneutical positioning replace scholarly history. For Milbank historical scholarship is a “finite idol.”<sup>28</sup> He is an heir of Nietzsche’s unmasking of the mythology of “truthfulness,” as well as of Heidegger’s throwing of subjectivity into time and of being into history. Storytelling lays claim to a postmodern criticism of critical reason which pulls to earth the modern theoretical subject poised above it.

In fact, however, metahistory depends upon the absolutely characteristic modern critical spirit by which history was set against tradition for the sake of freedom from it. Educated Protestants know that their use of Scripture against tradition and ecclesiastical authority depends on critical history.<sup>29</sup> Radical Orthodoxy depends on the Enlightenment development of this critical spirit—which has, of course, earlier origins. Without their break from traditions, especially religious ones, the Radically Orthodox could neither achieve the simultaneous presence of the entire past on which their narrative depends, nor leap over the modern to what precedes it and is submerged in it. The arbitrary and eclectic relation to tradition of their post-Enlightenment romanticism is exhibited in their Anglo-Catholic Affirming Catholicism, which subordinates itself to no Anglican norms: liturgical, doctrinal, or moral.

The double-mindedness of their position, and of his own relation to himself, is present in their grandfather, the professor of Classical Philology, Friedrich Nietzsche. Criticism of scientific history is at the heart of his *Genealogy of Morals*.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, Nietzsche’s book depends on the critical freedom by which the historical scholar recovers what is prior to the moral opposition of good and evil consummated in modern truthfulness. With Radical Orthodoxy, too, there is simultaneously both a critical reinterpretation of old texts for the sake of the new narrative, and a disregard for

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<sup>28</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 1.

<sup>29</sup> See my “The Bible in a Post-Critical Age,” in *After the Deluge: Essays Towards the Desecularization of the Church*, ed. William Oddie (London: SPCK, 1987), 41–92.

<sup>30</sup> See esp. the third essay, §§ 24–26, one of Nietzsche’s many negative reflections on scientific history.

every discipline of scholarship, so that ideological phantasies or fables about our origins and cultural history pass for theology. James Hanvey rightly describes this as another “colonization” of the philosophical and theological tradition. The addition to this imperialism of what Hanvey calls a sophisticated postmodern “strategy of deception”<sup>31</sup> results in misrepresentations of the most elementary kinds.<sup>32</sup> As Janz shows, its creativity is both ideological and illiterate.

The past is scoured to find what modernity has lost. Then, having over-passed the modern “secular standards of scientific truth or normative rationality,” Radical Orthodoxy retells our history so as to suit reason subordinated to desire, to *praxis* and *poesis*.<sup>33</sup> For Radical Orthodoxy, we create our world in what it calls a post-Derridean “logontic” where the divine and human are interchangeable. Because our world is linguistic, Milbank judges that “man as an *original* creator” participates “in some measure in creation *ex nihilo*.”<sup>34</sup>

Are there any criteria for this storytelling creativity? Janz shows that, because of the Radical Orthodox antipathy to philosophy, its claims about reason cannot be proven rationally either in principle or in fact. He goes on to ask why, as an alternative, Milbank does “not follow the exegetical route in the way that Barth did,” in order to give authority to his claim to orthodoxy.<sup>35</sup> Janz answers, using Milbank’s own words:

“[B]y refusing all ‘mediations’ through other spheres of knowledge and culture” Barth’s “ploddingly exegetical” approach “tended to assume a positive autonomy for theology, which rendered philosophical concerns a matter of indifference.” Radical Orthodoxy by comparison aspires to be, in its own words, “more mediating but less accommodating”: that is, “more mediating” of non-theological discourse than Barthian exegesis but also “less accommodating” of reason than Barthianism (since Barth allowed reason to have an “unquestioned validity within its own sphere” which of course is precisely what Radical Orthodoxy rejects.)<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> James Hanvey, “Conclusion: Continuing the Conversation,” *Radical Orthodoxy? A Catholic Inquiry*, 149–171, at 155 and 164.

<sup>32</sup> See Nicholas Lash, “Where does Holy Teaching Leave Philosophy? Questions on Milbank’s Aquinas,” *Modern Theology* 15 (1999): 433–44; W. J. Hankey, “Why Philosophy Abides for Aquinas,” *The Heythrop Journal* 42 (2001): 329–48.

<sup>33</sup> Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism,” 225–6.

<sup>34</sup> Milbank, “Pleonasm, Speech and Writing,” in *The Word Made Strange*, 55–83, at 79, and “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism,” §42.

<sup>35</sup> Janz, “Radical Orthodoxy,” 384.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, quoting *Radical Orthodoxy*, 2.

Crucially, its opposition to modernity—and thus, according to its account of modernity, its opposition to autonomous reason—determines that neither philosophy nor exegesis can provide it with authority. Janz concludes that the only recourse for Radical Orthodoxy is to a “particular ideological historiography.”<sup>37</sup> The only authority for their position is its idiosyncratic portrayal of others. As Janz puts it:

In the absence of reason or exegesis or confession (or anything else involving the *intentional* activity of a conscious subject) as normative or stabilizing authority, a new kind of Gnosticism (i.e. a secret depth open to a higher, prophetic and political exercise of reason) appears to be the only way of preserving the normativity or authority that orthodoxy requires ... therefore they abandon the requirement for answerability to anything that could count as a “public” authority and come to be based instead on the special “intellectual intuition” or prophetic ingenuity of a few.<sup>38</sup>

### III.

*Platonic Myths.* Milbank situates his school, against the false religion constituting modernity, within a postmodern theology developed out of “the theological turn” in French phenomenology. For him, the leaders of this phenomenology—Jean-Luc Marion, Paul Ricœur, Jean-François Courtine, Michel Henry, and others<sup>39</sup>—follow Heidegger in admitting “the end of metaphysics” but attempt to avoid “the nihilism of *la différance*,” which Milbank associates pre-eminently but by no means exclusively with Derrida. In the last decade, Milbank has followed and criticized these thinkers, and especially Jean-Luc Marion, to the point where the dependence has become a polemical but parasitic misrepresentation.<sup>40</sup>

For both Marion and Milbank, getting beyond secularizing modernity requires reducing or eliminating the autonomy of philosophy. This takes an extreme form in Marion, as Milbank recognizes. However, Marion is not radically anti-philosophical enough for Milbank, who writes: “Marion continues to develop the characteristic twentieth-century theology of divine word as gift and event, he also effects the most massive *correlation* of this theology with contemporary philosophy, but ... he usurps

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 399.

<sup>39</sup> See Milbank, “Postmodernité,” in *Dictionnaire critique de théologie*, ed. Jean-Yves Lacoste, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2002), 924–5, at 924.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Milbank, “The Soul of Reciprocity, Part One: Reciprocity Refused,” *Modern Theology* 17 (2001): 335–91, and “The Soul of Reciprocity, Part Two: Reciprocity Granted,” *Modern Theology* 17 (2001): 485–507.

and radicalizes philosophy's own categories in favor of theological ones."<sup>41</sup> Crucially, Milbank supposes that he has overcome the immanentizing reason inherent in philosophy. He identifies this as the problem both with modernity and with philosophy from its beginning among the pre-Socratics. Despite refusing metaphysics, Marion erred by staying with philosophy even as phenomenology, and for retaining a foundational modern subjectivity.<sup>42</sup> Milbank supposes that (1) having correctly located the problem in philosophy as immanentizing reason, then (2) having exempted Platonism from this judgment, and (3) having surrendered philosophy more radically than all others, (4) he can have philosophy back.

For Milbank, overcoming modernity requires a retrieval of the pre-modern, but this is not a "restoration of a pre-modern Christian position."<sup>43</sup> He maintains that patristic and medieval thought "was unable to overcome entirely the ontology of substance in the direction of a view which sees reality as constituted by signs and their endless ramifications."<sup>44</sup> What remained of the ontology of substance became in modernity a metaphysics of subjectivity. To be rid of both, "[t]here can be no relapse towards pre-modernity; rather any retrieval must assume a post-modern, metacritical guise."<sup>45</sup> This is where Derrida becomes essential.

The relation of the Radically Orthodox to Derrida is deeply ambiguous. His anti-foundationalism is embraced in order to free theology from modern secular rationality. They follow his refusal to allow identical repetition. Derrida's idea of "the real as linguistic"<sup>46</sup> becomes part of making humanity essentially poetic and an original creator. Furthermore, Derrida serves to deconstruct the identity of the modern subject and its constitution of a matching rational object: that is, as Pickstock puts it, "the reduction of being to the 'object' whose existence does not exceed the extent to which it is known by the subject."<sup>47</sup> However, because he does not embrace the primal Christian myths, Derrida must be, and is found to be, nihilistic. Radical Orthodoxy's strategies for surmounting this nihilism include: (1) the restoration of ontology, but with (2) the refusal of henology (that is, of a Neoplatonism for which the One, not Being is first), and (3) receptivity to a tradition (Christian Platonism). Ontology, philosophy, and metaphysics are saved by a total reduction of the autonomy of reason so that a theological ontology, philosophy, and metaphysics replace them. Whereas Jean-Luc

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<sup>41</sup> Milbank, "Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics," *New Blackfriars* vol. 76, no. 895 (July/August 1995—Special Issue on Jean-Luc Marion's *God without Being*): 325–43, at 325.

<sup>42</sup> See *ibid.*, 329–41, and *idem*, "Can a Gift be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic," *Modern Theology* 11 (1995): 119–61, esp. 132 ff., and *idem*, "The Soul of Reciprocity, Part One."

<sup>43</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 2.

<sup>44</sup> Milbank, "The Linguistic Turn as a Theological Turn," in *The Word Made Strange*, 84–120, at 85.

<sup>45</sup> Milbank, "A Critique of the Theology of the Right," 7.

<sup>46</sup> Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 2.

<sup>47</sup> Pickstock, *After Writing*, 70, and see chap. 2, generally.

Marion, as a disciple of Levinas, refuses the Neoplatonic One for the sake of the Good and charity,<sup>48</sup> Radical Orthodoxy supposes that its theological ontology allows it both to have God as Being and to embrace enthusiastically the theurgic *poiēsis* that, however, emerged in Neoplatonism only together with a strongly negative henological theology. Milbank supposes that his Neoplatonism, refounded in Christian myth, will allow him to have “the Platonic Good, reinterpreted by Christianity as identical with Being.”<sup>49</sup> Because, in his judgment, despite all their efforts, Marion and his French co-workers retain a residual autonomy for reason and the modern subject (which goes with that autonomy), Milbank convicts them of the nihilism of which he also convicted Derrida.

For Milbank, freeing theology from philosophy (and all of us from modernity) demands taking Marion’s theological opposition to philosophy more radically. For Milbank, “Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics.” Criticizing Marion’s use of “phenomenological donation to rethink it as Christian charity,” he writes:

An independent phenomenology must be given up, along with the claim, which would have seemed so bizarre to the Fathers, to be doing philosophy *as well as* theology ... [P]hilosophy as autonomous, as “about” anything independently of its creaturely status *is* metaphysics or ontology in the most precisely technical sense. Philosophy in fact *began* as a secularizing immanentism, an attempt to regard a *cosmos* independently of a performed reception of the poetic word. The pre-Socratics forgot both Being and the gift, while (*contra* Heidegger) the later Plato made some attempt to recover the extra-cosmic vatic *logos*. Theology has always resumed this inheritance, along with that of the Bible, and if it wishes to think again God’s love, then it must entirely evacuate philosophy, which is metaphysics, leaving it nothing (outside imaginary worlds, logical implications or the isolation of *aporias*) to either do or see, which is not—manifestly, I judge—malicious.<sup>50</sup>

Within these judgments about the history of Western thought and the proper character of theology Milbank turns to Platonism as against metaphysical, ontological, and autonomous philosophy. The Plato who is usually seen as the archetypal philosopher has been replaced by one who inscribes reason within myth; philosophical *theoria* is overcome by liturgical *poiēsis*.

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<sup>48</sup> See Jean-Luc Marion, *L’idole et la distance. Cinq études* (Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 1977), 185; idem, “Entretien” with Dominique Janicaud in the latter’s *Heidegger en France*, 2 vols. (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001), 2:210–227, at 216.

<sup>49</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 295–6.

<sup>50</sup> Milbank, “Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics,” 340–1.

The problem with philosophy, metaphysics, and ontology can be solved if their substantiality and their quest for autonomy relative to myth are eliminated. In fact, an independent philosophy is a vain imagination, because even the desire for rational self-completeness originates in myth. *Poiēsis* as myth-making is both prior and determinative; thus salvation depends on being within the right poetic tradition. According to Milbank's account, ancient philosophy sought objective substantiality and modern philosophy sought subjective substantiality (both of which are to be opposed), because they remained "inside the horizons projected by the Greek *mythos*, within which the Greek *logos* had to remain confined."<sup>51</sup> What makes postmodern thought nihilistic is its neopaganism. Milbank envisages instead of the ancient, modern, and postmodern rationalities "another ontology" that is "'another philosophy'" and "another metaphysics."<sup>52</sup> In the place of autonomous philosophy, there would be a "theological ontology, not an ontology independent of a divinely illumined access to the divine."<sup>53</sup> Inscribed within the Christian rather than within the Greek *mythos*, this metaphysics would be properly Christian.

Milbank's theology belongs with the work of Marion, and much of twentieth-century French philosophy, in a common enterprise to reach a sphere beyond what is conceived as the closure of the Western self within modern metaphysics.<sup>54</sup> Marion speaks about modernity as "completed" in virtue of a "terminal figure of metaphysics, such as it develops from Descartes to Nietzsche" and judges that "'postmodernity' begins, when, among other things, the metaphysical determination of God is called into question."<sup>55</sup> Milbank characterizes modernity in the same way, and on the same basis announces its end. When responding to Marion's *God without Being*, Milbank judged: "recent researches suggest that 'modernity fulfills metaphysics' should be radicalized as 'modernity invented metaphysics.'"<sup>56</sup> By this common shift from Heidegger's "modernity fulfills metaphysics" to "modernity invented metaphysics," both thinkers use Heidegger's analysis of the modern while attempting to save pre-modern theology. The difference is between them is that, for Milbank, once metaphysics has been placed within Christian myth, he can get it back.

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<sup>51</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 295.

<sup>52</sup> Milbank, "Can a Gift be Given?" 152 and 137 with 132, and "A Critique of the Theology of the Right," 29.

<sup>53</sup> Milbank, "The Linguistic Turn as a Theological Turn," 100.

<sup>54</sup> See Jacob Schmutz, "Escaping the Aristotelian Bond: the Critique of Metaphysics in Twentieth-Century French Philosophy," *Dionysius* 17 (1999): 169–200, and W. J. Hankey, *Cent ans de néoplatonisme en France. Une brève histoire philosophique*, published with Jean-Marc Narbonne, *Levinas et l'héritage grec* (Paris : Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin; Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2004).

<sup>55</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), xx–xxi.

<sup>56</sup> Milbank, "Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics," 328.

For Milbank, metaphysics and ontology have two senses. The first sense belongs to the late medieval and modern “attempts to have a prior ‘general’ metaphysics and ontology, wherein being can emphatically be treated in its supposed own integrity, before one goes on to treat God in ‘special’ metaphysics as the highest instance of being.”<sup>57</sup> The second sense, which applies to patristic and medieval theology, is looser and wider. Here “the inherited general categories for being were both contaminated and revised by the consideration of narrative event.”<sup>58</sup> In virtue of a “gnoseological circularity between ontology and narrative ... the event of revelation both interrupted and completed ontology itself.”<sup>59</sup> In consequence, metaphysics, in the second looser and wider sense, is restored to Christian theology. Milbank judges: “Beyond metaphysics, then, there is only metaphysics, intruding into all knowledge, all lived cultural existence.”<sup>60</sup> Once it is subjected to the Christian myth, metaphysics returns so completely that “we are right to trust in a limited intellectual insight into the structures of being” and are correct to affirm, with Hegel, that “to choose this speculation is therefore to choose reason itself.”<sup>61</sup>

Milbank’s new metaphysics, which does not “position” Christian theology from some pretence to a self-sufficient reason, is prefigured by “the radical changes undergone by ontology at the hands of the neo-Platonists and the Church Fathers: in particular Augustine and Dionysius the Areopagite.” In consequence, it was “no longer *exactly* Greek.” In a postmodern following of this radical transformation, the ancient Greek notions of “presence, substance, the idea, the subject, causality, thought-before-expression, and realist representation” are criticized. In this post-subject theology, the notions that by his account (and Nietzsche’s) undergird modern secular reason and the autonomous self are discarded. Once these notions are eliminated, Platonism reinterpreted by Christianity can be retrieved.<sup>62</sup>

The problem with this account is that more than half of the story is left out. Certainly, Plato composed new myths in conformity with the truth—which for him is the privileged possession of philosophy—and used myths that he regarded as unfalsifiable rather than as true. However, he had also a profoundly critical relation to myth. When Aristotle declares that “poets tell many a lie,” he is following Plato, who found that both the form and content of poetry lied.<sup>63</sup> Plato in turn is continuing a form of criticism that began at least with Xenophanes and is found also in the poets

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<sup>57</sup> Milbank “The Soul of Reciprocity, Part Two,” 487.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 486–7.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 488–9.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 489.

<sup>62</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 295–6.

<sup>63</sup> See Plato, *Republica* II, 379b–381c; *Timaeus* 29c–30a; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.2, 983a4, and *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7, 1177b30–35.

themselves.<sup>64</sup> In contrast to the Neoplatonists, who derived their allegorizing strategy from the Stoics, Plato rejects the hypothesis that myth conceals truth “since for him truth can only be revealed in philosophical discourse.”<sup>65</sup> Scholars use Plato as the *locus classicus* to define *mythos* relative to *logos* precisely because he is regarded as having set up this opposition.<sup>66</sup> As Luc Brisson shows, it is not myth that saves philosophy, but philosophy that saves myth.<sup>67</sup>

If Plato does not really serve Radical Orthodoxy’s purposes, it is equally the case that an examination of the actual forms in which patristic and medieval Christian Neoplatonism occurred presents the same problem. The elements that Milbank desires to lift out of Neoplatonism and those that he wants to leave behind were bound together. Moreover, and crucially, their union and development together are more Christian than pagan. The Christians united traditions divided against one another in pagan Neoplatonism and combined extremes beyond those contained within the thought of their pagan predecessors. To select some elements from the historically existent *summae* of Christian Neoplatonism is either to revert to earlier pagan forms or to renounce the logic of theology become systematic for the sake of something altogether arbitrary. The result of this arbitrariness in Radical Orthodoxy is *poiēsis* as a falsification of history.

One of the unifications made by the Christian theologians of antiquity and intensified by their medieval successors, who simultaneously distinguished them more clearly and united them more closely, was between philosophy, theology, and religion. In this, the Christians were successors of the later Neoplatonists, especially the hero of Radical Orthodoxy, Iamblichus.<sup>68</sup> The “divine” Iamblichus is all at once a ritualistic priest, a theologian, and a philosopher. Yet he knows the differences between these roles and their necessary mutual interconnections. The central purpose of his system is to maintain the difference, the integrity, and the connection of: (1) diverse religious practices in which the gods and humans cooperate, (2) human moral discipline, (3) the rational and human work of philosophy, and (4) our passive yielding to the gracious activity of the divine toward us. The loss of the proper subject, discipline, and autonomy of philosophy to theology and religion is altogether contrary to the intention and practice of Iamblichus. Maintaining otherwise in respect either to post-Iamblichian

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<sup>64</sup> See *Reason and Religion in Socratic Philosophy*, ed. Nicholas D. Smith and Paul B. Woodruff (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6–7.

<sup>65</sup> Luc Brisson, *Plato the Myth-Maker*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Gerard Naddaf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 127.

<sup>66</sup> See Luc Brisson, *How Philosophers Saved Myths: Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology*, trans. Catherine Tihanyi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 5–28.

<sup>67</sup> See *ibid.*, *passim*.

<sup>68</sup> See Hankey, “Philosophy as Way of Life for Christians? Iamblichian and Porphyrian Reflections on Religion, Virtue, and Philosophy in Thomas Aquinas,” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 59 (2003): 193–224.

Neoplatonism or to its Arabic, Jewish, and Christian successors can only derive from ignorance or ideological imposition.

Iamblichus held that philosophy is the properly human activity and preserved its difference from the religiously participated action of the gods toward us. He judged that it belonged to the human soul, from which he distinguished other spiritual substances and to which he attributed a unique character and a specified place in the cosmos. When philosophy and the human subject are eliminated, we do not so much “transcend” the “modern bastard dualisms” as destroy the preconditions of mediation and collapse its structures. With Heidegger, with the French Christian phenomenologists on whom Milbank depends, and with Radical Orthodoxy, the mediatorial structures that are essential to Neoplatonism disappear. The “neo-Neoplatonism” of our time joins life and the Absolute immediately.<sup>69</sup> For Radical Orthodoxy, the First Principle and sensual life are immediately united, that is to say, without the mediation of soul or mind. The moral and rational disciplines are replaced with a postmodern incarnational Neoplatonism. Jean-Marc Narbonne locates the most radical form of such an immediate union of the experienced and the Absolute in Heidegger. Narbonne, who concludes a recent book with a comparison between the verticality of the Neoplatonic metaphysics and the Being of Heidegger as immediate horizontal ground, points to the grave problems with the Heideggerian (and Radically Orthodox) alternative:

Despite a certain community in the will to pass beyond objectification ... one has ascertained that Neoplatonism is set out along an axis opposed to that indicated by Heidegger. The Neoplatonic way is erected vertically; it is ordered upward along a mediation notably by way of soul and intellect. ... The Heideggerian horizontal approach is totally different. ... In place of the steps of reality he substitutes a pure process which begins from an event (the *Sein* as *Ereignis*), with which there is no mediated connection: ... In place of the Neoplatonic theme of the “beyond” (*epékeina*), it seems to me that he proposes the theme of the “on the contrary side,” that is to say of that which happens without mediation, if not in opposition, at least as something done behind its back, and as a kind of crossing-over from everything else.<sup>70</sup>

It is ironic, but not surprising, that a “neo-Neoplatonism,” created in large part by a fundamental acceptance and partial rejection of the Heideggerian critique of Western metaphysics, reproduces what is most problematic about the structure of Heidegger’s alternative metaphysics.

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<sup>69</sup> See my *Cent ans*, 136–42, 209–10, 227–38.

<sup>70</sup> Jean-Marc Narbonne, *Hénologie, ontologie et Ereignis (Plotin-Proclus-Heidegger)* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2001), 280–1.

Janz exposes the same logic in Radical Orthodoxy and finds its appeal to “a secret, hidden, invisible depth of material things” to be essential to its gnostic obscurantism.<sup>71</sup> The hiddenness at its heart, Janz writes,

may not be understood in the more usual sense of “transcendent,” as something *supra*-natural ... It must rather be taken ... as something “subterranean” and “invisible” *within immanence*, which then in turn serves as a bridge of sorts to the transcendent, but which also, in virtue of its subterranean secrecy, requires special, intellectually “prophetic” insights to disclose.<sup>72</sup>

Recent years have seen more and more rehabilitations of ancient and medieval thinkers by Radical Orthodoxy as its colonization of history progresses. When entering this empire each of them must surrender what is specific to his thought. In return, the truth about many of them is unlocked for the first time when the Radical Orthodox hermeneutic finds the immediate union of transcendence and corporeal depth, which gives their positions truth. Aristotle has recently been recruited, as interpreted through Merleau-Ponty and corrected within Platonism – without noting that the corrections made to his positions are owed, in fact, to his contributions to Platonism! Flesh as self-sensing replaces soul, so that the sensation need not be explained through any higher actuality. Along the same lines, motion replaces life in the Aristotelian definitions. Thus in order to make sensed and sensing reciprocal, non-living objects have been eliminated. Touch is given an exaggerated priority and turns out to be the basis of human immortality. Milbank finds the hidden truth of philosophy:

[P]hilosophy must return to an always secretly presupposed ontological depth ... and in Aristotle also, the doctrine of flesh is a paradoxically spiritual or psychic doctrine: indeed more emphatically so ... We are, as humans, immortal because more embodied, that is to say, as touching more comprehensively and with more intensity.<sup>73</sup>

*Truth in Aquinas* by Pickstock and Milbank dissolves Aquinas’s Aristotelian noetic into intellectual intuition and Augustinian illumination in order to reduce philosophy to what the authors call “theology proper.” Metaphysics is collapsed into sacred doctrine.

<sup>74</sup> In truth, Thomas is moving in the other direction. Pope John Paul II was right to assert

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<sup>71</sup> Janz, “Radical Orthodoxy,” 399.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 386–7.

<sup>73</sup> Milbank, “The Soul of Reciprocity, Part Two: Reciprocity Granted,” 492–4.

<sup>74</sup> Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 22–4, 51, 118 n. 8, 126 n. 103.

that “[a]lthough St. Albert the Great and St. Thomas insisted on the existence of a close link between theology and philosophy, even so they were the first learned men to admit the necessary autonomy that philosophy and the sciences needed, so that each should depend upon arguments belonging to their own sphere.”<sup>75</sup> In addition, Aquinas’s teaching about the spiritual senses provides Milbank with an opportunity to assimilate his doctrine to that of Aristotle just noted.<sup>76</sup> Along the same road, Pickstock gives the immediate union of matter and the transcendent a special Thomistic form in contrast to humans:

Aquinas suggests that God is much more of a country bumpkin (*rusticus*) capable of a brutal direct unreflective intuition of cloddish earth, bleared and smeared with toil. For God’s mind, although immaterial, is (in a mysterious way) commensurate with matter, since God creates matter.<sup>77</sup>

In his devastating criticism of the misrepresentations in Pickstock’s “elegant and creative conceit,” Laurence Hemming discerns that this is “a central plank in Radical Orthodoxy’s programme.”<sup>78</sup>

Moreover, Paul Janz exposes an inversion of Kant’s teaching. He writes: “The centerpiece of Milbank’s ideological historiography in its negative aspect is an interpretation of Kant that will be found to be almost entirely unsustainable when measured against Kant’s own writings.” Janz reports that when “characterising modern philosophy, culminating in Kant, as most essentially the search for ‘purest objectivity’ based on pure reason,” Milbank claims that “this project of ‘purest objectivity’ *must* lead to nihilism inasmuch as ‘only *nothing* fulfills the condition for a perfectly inert, controllable object.’ In a pivotal declaration, Milbank actually defines Kantian ‘critical philosophy [as] the *attitude* of pure reason itself [which] is also the stance of nihilism.” On the way to a demolition of this interpretation, Janz comments:

But, as the title alone of the *Critique of Pure Reason* so obviously states, precisely the opposite is true, and any attentive reading ... will reinforce unmistakably what the title so clearly asserts: the *Critique* is not the *attitude* of pure reason but the *critique* of it.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> *Fides et Ratio*, §§ 43 and 45; *Restoring Faith in Reason: A New Translation of the Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II together with a Commentary and Discussion*, ed. by Laurence Paul Hemming and Susan Frank Parsons (London: SCM Press, 2002), 69 and 75.

<sup>76</sup> See Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, 72–82.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>78</sup> L. P. Hemming, “*Quod Impossibile Est!* Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy,” *Radical Orthodoxy? A Catholic Inquiry*, 76–93, at 78.

<sup>79</sup> Janz, “Radical Orthodoxy,” 372.

#### IV.

*A Poetic Lie.* Plato detected that in respect to poetic theology misrepresentation takes two aspects: one has to do with form, the other with content. Both apply to Radical Orthodoxy's *poiēsis*.

The fundamental problems arise with respect to form. Milbank describes his theological writing as “composing a new theoretical music.”<sup>80</sup> Theory belongs to composition and is not separable from it. Because we join in the cosmic and divine *poiēsis*, governed not by truth but by desire, there can be no theoretical distance or objectivity. Theory occurs as a necessarily incomplete moment within *praxis*. The divisions between letter and allegory, between listening and telling, between speech and act, between *theoria* and *poiēsis*, between revelation and metaphysics break down. For Milbank, “[l]ike nihilism, Christianity can, should, embrace the differential flux.”<sup>81</sup> Christian faithfulness is poetic surrender to the musical flow which is “temporal occurrence through us.”<sup>82</sup>

In fact, however, there is no real surrender to the other here. What belongs to theory is self-consciously constructed within *poiēsis*, *praxis*, and desire in order to stand against modern theoretical truthfulness. When we know that “we know what we want to know,” will to know in accord with desire, and cannot submit that desire to knowledge, or knowledge to truth, we have enclosed ourselves in a circle constructed against the fear of nihilism. Surrender to the genuinely other, or even attentive listening, is impossible precisely because of the anti-modern purpose of the stories Radical Orthodoxy tells and the songs it sings.

In its circling of the wagons against modernity, Radical Orthodoxy moves back and forth between two poles. On the one side, it uses the resources of modern critical history to free itself from the doctrinal, theological, and philosophical norms of its Anglican origins in order to establish new authorities, new traditions, new readings, and to confute its adversaries. On the other side, there are elementary careless misunderstandings, and polemical, grossly selective misrepresentations. If this did nothing more than reflect the ignorance of the history of late ancient and medieval philosophy and theology in the Anglo-American world—an ignorance connected to what is authoritative for Anglicanism—it might escape the suspicion of a nihilistic cynicism. However, what recommends this movement is precisely its use of sophisticated contemporary French historical and philosophical work. Its self-conscious

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<sup>80</sup> Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 1, and see idem, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism,” §8, 227 and §42, 237.

<sup>81</sup> Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism,” §8, 227.

<sup>82</sup> Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 44 and 142.

refusal of truthfulness systematically prevents the disciplines that activity within the modern scholarly tradition requires. This incapacity for combining theoretical speculation and exact historical scholarship is not found among the French thinkers upon whom Radical Orthodoxy is dependent.

As a result it cannot come to a common mind with others in the scholarly community. Recollect some “tall tales” we have encountered above. The pre-Socratics did not “forget Being” and their philosophy was the very opposite of “an attempt to regard a *cosmos* independently of a performed reception of the poetic word.” Many pre-Socratics united poetry, ritual, religious community, and philosophy and Plato continued some of their critical strategies. In Aristotle the moving and the sensate cannot be conflated, nor can the flesh and the soul. Neither Plato nor pagan Neoplatonists, nor yet Christian ones, surrendered the claims of philosophy to know the truth in order to give place to myth and revelation. Neoplatonism is not a way to escape subjectivity or to unite God and the flesh immediately. For it, all is mediated through soul and mind.<sup>83</sup> The self-reflexive and self-certain Augustinian *cogito* is not lost in cosmic liturgy. For Augustine, the self-certainty of our existence as reasoning life remains essential to us even when our being, understanding, and loving are directed to God, and act in and by God’s own Trinitarian life.<sup>84</sup> Aquinas does not collapse metaphysics into revealed theology nor revert to an Augustinian intellectual intuition. Kant does not constitute a pure ideal object by way of the attitude of pure reason; this is the dogmatism he aims to avert.

Radical Orthodoxy’s falsification of the past is compulsive, because the anti-modern character of its postmodernity requires it. In fact, there is little genuinely postmodern about Radical Orthodoxy, if we mean by this a stance beyond the modern wars within and between philosophy, and theology, religion and secularity. Mostly we witness another version of reactionary Christian hatred and fear of Enlightenment reason and secularity. The truth about our past cannot be told from within this polemic. When the pre-modern, which contains that by which we made ourselves modern, is known only in opposition to it, truth about history is the first victim of the war. This is not only because of the objective connections in the development of the West, but also because we became postmoderns through the modern unification of history and philosophy. Barth, Heidegger, Rahner, von Balthasar, and Derrida, whether right or wrong about this or that, stand with Marx and Nietzsche on our side of Hegel. For them

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<sup>83</sup> See Hankey, “*Secundum rei vim vel secundum cognoscentium facultatem*: Knower and Known in the *Consolation of Philosophy* of Boethius and the *Proslogion* of Anselm,” *Medieval Philosophy and the Classical Tradition in Islam, Judaism and Christianity*, ed. John Inglis (Richmond, England: Curzon Press, 2002), 126–50.

<sup>84</sup> See Augustine, *De trinitate* 15.12.21. Cf. also 14.19.26 and W. J. Hankey, “Self-Knowledge and God as Other in Augustine: Problems for a Postmodern Retrieval,” *Bochumer Philosophisches Jahrbuch für Antike und Mittelalter* 4 (1999): 83–123, at 116–22.

all history is governed by a logic that we discern as if from the point of its completed working out. The freedom by which we would turn against philosophical *theoria* to Nietzschean, Heideggerian, or orthodox Christian *poiēsis* is grounded in the disciplines of theoretical truthfulness. To leave these out turns *poiēsis* toward the very nihilistic arbitrariness it claims to avoid.

Postmodern *poiēsis* can escape nihilism only by acquiring the disciplines of contemplation—disciplines that one may learn from philosophy and from modern scholarship, both religious and secular. Paul Janz sees a necessity for theology to reacquire “the intellectual virtues which have traditionally been associated with philosophy *at its best*” and calls for “a return to ontological questioning in theology.”<sup>85</sup> “If God does not reduce to a field of play in our individual or collective imaginations, or to acts of literary judgment ... or even without remainder to the life of the church,” then we must inquire as to the being of what answers our religious quests. We must choose “to allow for the independent integrity of the source of one’s interrogative concern.”<sup>86</sup> What we ask about must be allowed to assert its independence. Janz lists contemporary religious writers in whose work he sees the convergence of the ethical and the ontological: he includes Paul Ricœur, Jean-Luc Marion, and Emmanuel Levinas, contrasting their practice with that of the Radically Orthodox. He writes:

If we listen to these kinds of writers, we will find that the intellectual virtue of attentiveness to which they inevitably lead us—i.e. *choosing to allow for the independent integrity of the source of one’s interrogative concern*—is always at the same time a move toward ontology and ethics, and as such away from logical cynicism ... Loving God with one’s (own) mind, which must surely remain the innermost heart of genuine Christian thinking, does not easily avail itself ... of labyrinthian intellectual shortcuts.<sup>87</sup>

There is surely little more important at present than the cultivation of virtues that can be common between those committed to different religious communities and those outside them. As we face the terrible return of the gods, a criticism of modernity’s forgetfulness is appropriate, a loss of its virtues is not. After all Christianity assisted at their creation. As Michael Harrington writes of another matter: “The present day and the medieval stand on opposite sides of modernity, but they share a relation to it. The medieval holds the seeds of modernity, while the present holds its fallen leaves.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Janz, “Radical Orthodoxy,” 366 and 400.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 400.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 401.

<sup>88</sup> L. Michael Harrington, *Sacred Place in Early Medieval Neoplatonism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 14.

*Poiēsis* asserted in a war against modernity finally joins us to nothing because it begins by separating us from ourselves.<sup>89</sup>

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