

“ ‘POETS TELL MANY A LIE’: RADICAL ORTHODOXY’S POETIC HISTORIES”<sup>1</sup>  
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### I. POIËSIS: CHRISTIAN AND POSTMODERN

As my title indicates I propose to describe and evaluate Radical Orthodoxy where it locates itself, as a form of postmodern *Poiësis*. John Milbank connects *Poiësis* and postmodern Christianity as follows:

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>2</sup>

In another essay, he 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’ 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>3</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>4</sup>

Before describing Radical Orthodoxy and its *poiësis*, we should begin by thinking about poetry, Christianity, and religion in a way that Radical Orthodoxy would generally approve. The divine - human poetry essential to Christianity and, *mutatis mutandis*, to religion generally is:

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1 This paper originated as a lecture for “Poiësis: Making and Unmaking the World” the Contemporary Studies Lecture Series at the University of King’s College 2001-2002 and was revised for the Christianity and Literature Study Group Plenary Session with the Canadian Evangelical Theological Association on May 28th 2003, at the Learned Societies in Halifax. I am grateful to Elizabeth Edwards and Christopher Elson at King’s and to Barbara Pell and David Williams of the Christianity and Literature Study Group for the invitations and for the useful discussions both occasions provided. Ian Stewart generously provided needed encouragement and his critical eye.

2 John Milbank, “A Critique of the Theology of the Right,” idem, *The Word Made Strange. Theology, Language, Culture*, (Oxford: Blackwells, 1997) 7-35 at 32.

3 J. Milbank, “‘Postmodern Critical Augustinianism’: A Short *Summa* in Forty Two Responses to Unasked Questions,” in *Modern Theology* 7 (1991): 225-237 at 231-35.

4 Ibid.: 225-26.

- a) first, simply liturgy, roughly the prayer of the religious community, which embraces everything from the dance of cultic movement, hymns, and music to architecture, as well as the verbal prose and poetry we ordinarily associate with liturgy,
- b) second, the myth-making or story-telling which is reflected in but by no means confined to what is called Holy Scripture, and includes the stories of the saints great and small, and recounting the on-going supernatural or miraculous (the non prosaic), revelation which constitutes the Church,
- c) third, making and being the Church, which is everything from entrance into, life in, and extension of the sacred community, the edifying care it extends to its members, to humanity, and to the world as the steward of God's reign, and even extends to the projection of its appropriate political communities ("states") both as the secularization of the church and as its antipode.

It is easily seen that *poiêsis* is the normal and ordinary religious activity, perhaps even the essential character of religious life. Although some of the language I have used here is current, John Milbank is not wrong to see Patristic and Medieval Christian writers representing the life of the Church as poetic in the ways I have listed. Certainly, the Radically Orthodox are right to judge that these forms of *poiêsis* are united in works of Christian theology within the Platonic tradition like the *Confessions* of Augustine (especially when the first ten books are considered in light of the last three) and the *Periphyseon* of John Scottus Eriugena. Radical Orthodoxy is the reassertion of what is normal in the present circumstances. As such it should be and would be unremarkable.

Radical Orthodoxy, however, is neither unremarkable nor uncontroversial because it self-consciously makes this reassertion in the context of what we may generally identify as a Heideggerian understanding of our world, and of the role of philosophy in constructing it. Within the metaphysics of the will to power which, for Heidegger, constructs modernity and concluded metaphysics as a whole, the West witnessed the death of God, and either endeavoured to annihilate religion and the gods as a consequence, or ushered them to the ineffectual margins. Heidegger assumes the death, witnesses to it, and seeks in *poiêsis* a way beyond it.<sup>5</sup> In fact, we now face the survival of both religion and the gods, and we witness the return of gods who have immunized themselves from the rationality of the old metaphysics. As a result, much at the end of the last millennium and in the beginning of the new may make us ask whether it is poetry as religion, or whether it is rather modernity itself that are the more embattled in the postmodern world, and, therefore, whether the mixture of assertive arrogance and defensiveness which so mutilates Radical Orthodoxy is the right reaction of Christian theology to the present. However, the fact that it may come as a surprise to many that religion generally, and Christianity particularly, count as *poiêsis* and, indeed, the primary *poiêsis*, makes Radical Orthodoxy's reassertion of these against modernity of some real importance and use.

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<sup>5</sup> Laurence Paul Hemming, *Heidegger's Atheism. The Refusal of a Theological Voice* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002) 20, 41-73 and W.J. Hankey, "Why Heidegger's 'History' of Metaphysics is Dead," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, forthcoming.

## II. WHO THEY ARE

Radical Orthodoxy was founded within the Divinity School at Cambridge University and has moved out from there. The founding father is John Milbank and his *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason*,<sup>6</sup> sometimes described as Christian Socialism, provides the account of modernity upon which what follows depends. There, Milbank argued that theology must no longer allow itself to be placed from outside by philosophy and by secular thought generally. He endeavours to persuade theologians to get over their “false humility” in the face of modern secular reason whose challenge, he announces, “is at an end, for it is seen that modernity was itself made in terms of metaphysics, and of a ‘religion’.”<sup>7</sup> He claims that postmodernism has freed Christian theology from having to “measure up to ... standards of scientific truth and normative rationality.”

Writing the article on “Postmodernité” in the recent *Dictionnaire critique de théologie*, Milbank situates this “Cambridge School,” and its reassertion of Christian Orthodoxy against the false religion constituting modernity, within a postmodern theology developed out of what some have called “the theological turn” in French phenomenology. The leaders of this phenomenology: Jean-Luc Marion, Paul Ricour, Jean-François Courtine, Michel Henry and others,<sup>8</sup> follow Heidegger in admitting the “the end of metaphysics” but attempt to avoid “the nihilism of *la différance*” which Milbank associates pre-eminently with Derrida.<sup>9</sup> Milbank concludes his list of postmodern theologians with English theologians, often inspired by the last work of Wittgenstein. This Cambridge theological school, among whose members Milbank lists himself, was centered there until 1999 and included Graham Ward and Rowan Williams. He says they “integrated themes plucked out of French nihilism” with the work of the “French phénoménologues.”<sup>10</sup> Milbank himself fashioned what he called a

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6 Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990 on which see the special issues of *Modern Theology* and *New Blackfriars*: *Modern Theology* 8:4 (October, 1992), *New Blackfriars* 73:861 (June, 1992). Milbank tells us (“Enclaves or Where is the Church?” *New Blackfriars*, 73:861 [June, 1992]: 341) that *Theology and Social Theory*, is “accurately précised” by Fergus Kerr’s “Simplicity Itself: Milbank’s Thesis,” *New Blackfriars*, 73:861 (June, 1992): 306-10. David Burrell, “An Introduction to *Theology and Social Theory*,” *Modern Theology* 8:4 (October, 1992): 319-29 provides a fine outline.

7 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* 1, 260.

8 J. Milbank, “Postmodernité,” in: J. -Y. Lacoste (ed.), *Dictionnaire critique de théologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998) 916-917. On the turn see Dominique Janicaud, *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française* (Paris: Editions de l’Eclat, 1991). The major proponents of this “theological turn” published a volume entitled *Phénoménologie et théologie*, présentation de Jean-François Courtine (Paris: Critérian, 1992), with essays by Michel Henry, Paul Ricoeur, Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Louis Chrétien. Very recently Janicaud has added yet another volume to this controversy: *La phénoménologie éclatée* (Paris: Editions de l’Eclat, 1998). On it all see Jacob Schmutz, “Escaping the Aristotelian Bond: the Critique of Metaphysics in Twentieth-Century French Philosophy,” *Dionysius* 17 (1999): 169-200.

9 On which see the stunningly bad book produced as a doctoral thesis in the Cambridge Divinity School and published in the “Radical Orthodoxy Series” at Routledge edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward: Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism. Philosophies of nothing and the difference of theology*, Radical Orthodoxy Series (London & New York: Routledge, 2002).

10 Milbank, “Postmodernité,” 917.

“Postmodern Critical Augustinianism.”<sup>11</sup> Ward is described as attempting “to make orthodoxy theology and Christology agree with la *différance derridéene*.”<sup>12</sup> Williams left Cambridge for the Lady Margaret Chair at Oxford, went on to an Archbishopric in Wales, and has now ascended Augustine’s throne in Canterbury. Milbank left Cambridge to become Professor of Philosophical Theology (surely an ironic title) at the University of Virginia, and Ward has moved on to become Professor of Contextual Theology at the University of Manchester. The youngest of them, Catherine Pickstock, whose *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*<sup>13</sup>, is an important contribution to the programme, remains among the swamps along the Cam. Milbank, Ward, and Pickstock have formed an association with others devoted to “Radical Orthodoxy” and continue to publish together as well as separately.

*Radical Orthodoxy, A New Theology*, edited by the trio in 1999, assembled essays by twelve authors of whom they tell us: “Seven of the contributors ... are Anglican, all of a High Church persuasion, five contributors are Roman Catholics. Eight of the twelve are British, four of them are American.” Their connections, as well as of those who influenced them, to Cambridge are listed, and the book is described “as very much a Cambridge collection.”<sup>14</sup> The group controls at least one journal, *Modern Theology*, a series at Blackwells and at Routledge. *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>15</sup> The Routledge Radical Orthodoxy Series edited by Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward has just published *Speech and Theology. Language and the logic of incarnation* by the young and prolific Canadian Evangelical anti-philosophical philosopher and theologian, James K.A. Smith, who gained his PhD at Villanova University under John Caputo. In North America, neither Anglicanism nor Anglo-Catholicism provide a large platform, and Catholic reactions are divided. However, Evangelicals like Smith are attracted by the opposition of the movement to philosophy and by its assertion of the highest claims for the autonomy of theology. Enough headway has been made in the Anglo-American world to get the movement a short piece in *Time* magazine reproducing a claim that Radical Orthodoxy is the “biggest development in theology since Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door.”<sup>16</sup> I can assure you that they were not quoting me!

As indicated above, the key to everything is an analysis of modernity, an opposition to it, and a conviction that we are postmodern. In a series of binary oppositions, modernity is reduced to *theoria* versus *poiësis*, substance versus *praxis*, the

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11 Milbank, “ ‘Postmodern Critical Augustinianism’: A Short *Summa* in Forty Two Responses to Unasked Questions.”

12 Milbank, “Postmodernité,” 917.

13 *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

14 *Radical Orthodoxy, A New Theology*, ed. J. Milbank, C. Pickstock and G. Ward (London - New York: Routledge, 1999), Acknowledgments.

15 *Radical Orthodoxy? - A Catholic Inquiry*, ed. L.P. Hemming (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

16 *The Chronicle of Higher Education* quoted in “Radical Orthodoxy, God as a Postmodern,” *Time*, December 17, 2002, 61.

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, etc. 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.

### III. MODERNITY, POSTMODERNITY, AND THE RETRIEVAL OF THE PAST

The characterisation of modernity is at base Heideggerian and Nietzschean, although it is considerably modified, sometimes even to the point of inversion. In the last decade, Milbank follows, engages, and criticises Jean-Luc Marion's work to the point where the dependence has become parasitic.<sup>17</sup> Marion's theology is deeply determined by Lévinas, on the one hand, and by a retrieval, from within contemporary French Neoplatonic scholarship, of the Pseudo-Dionysius, on the other. The center of the common analysis for John Milbank is his 1995 judgment, when responding to Marion's *God without Being*, that: "... it is arguable that recent researches suggest that 'modernity fulfills metaphysics' should be radicalized as 'modernity invented metaphysics'."<sup>18</sup> By this common shift from Heidegger's "modernity fulfills metaphysics" to "modernity invented metaphysics," anti-philosophical Christians use Heidegger's analysis of the modern while attempting to save pre-modern theology. In making this historical judgment about the modern invention of metaphysics, Milbank is drawing on Marion's work and on Marion's debt to French historians of philosophy like Étienne Gilson. In fact, Milbank, in opposition to Marion, wishes to resuscitate Gilson's notion of "Christian philosophy."<sup>19</sup>

For both Marion and Milbank, getting beyond secularizing modernity requires reducing or eliminating the autonomy of philosophy. This has already taken an extreme form in Marion, as Milbank recognises when he 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

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17 See, for example, John Milbank, "Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics," *New Blackfriars* 76:895 (July/August, 1995) "Special Issue on Jean-Luc Marion's *God without Being*": 325-43, it is reprinted in *The Word Made Strange*. I quote from the original. Most recently, there is "The Soul of Reciprocity, Part One: Reciprocity Refused," *Modern Theology* 17:3 (July 2001): 335-391 and "The Soul of Reciprocity, Part Two: Reciprocity Granted," *Modern Theology* 17:4 (October 2001): 485-507. Milbank is courteous but it cannot be called a dialogue because, to my knowledge, Marion has not replied in writing. Hemming's treatment of Marion is rudely polemical, see *Heidegger's Atheism* 249-69.

18 Milbank, "Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics": 328.

19 For Jean-Luc Marion see "Saint Thomas d'Aquin et l'onto-théo-logie," *Revue thomiste* 95:1 (1995): 31-66 at 56, note 60; 58, note 63; see also 60, note 70, and his "L'instauration de la rupture: Gilson à la lecture de Descartes," *Étienne Gilson et Nous: La philosophie et son histoire*, éd M. Courtier (Paris: Vrin, 1980) 13-34. For his relation to Heidegger see Dominique Janicaud, *Heidegger en France*, 2 vols. Idées (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001), ii, *Entretiens*, 210-27.

theology with contemporary philosophy, but ... he usurps and radicalizes philosophy's own categories in favour of theological ones ... Compared with Marion, the ambition of a Barth is as nothing, for it is as if, so to speak, (albeit in a mode already inscribed by Levinas) Marion seeks to be both Barth and Heidegger at once.<sup>20</sup>

Certainly, for both, getting beyond modernity requires that the *theoria* which constitutes the Cartesian *ego* not be taken as foundation. Crucially, Milbank supposes that he has overcome an immanentizing reason which might be founded therein. He identifies this, rather than the false transcendence Nietzsche and Heidegger exposed, as the problem both with modernity and with philosophy from its beginning among the pre-Socratics. He judges that Marion has mistaken the problem by following Lévinas. Both of the French thinkers allow Heidegger's history of Being as onto-theology to force them to give up speaking of God as Being. Milbank also criticises Marion for staying with philosophy even as phenomenology, and for thus retaining a foundational Cartesian or Kantian subjectivity.<sup>21</sup> As we shall see in a moment, Milbank supposes that (1) having correctly diagnosed the problem to be philosophy as immanentizing reason, then (2) exempted Platonism from this judgment, and, (3) surrendered philosophy more radically than all others, (4) he can, then, have philosophy back. To understand Milbank's judgment of Marion, one must keep in mind that for him, because he has more completely surrendered philosophy outside of revealed theology, he completely gets it back. Marion is for Milbank, simultaneously too philosophical and not philosophical enough.

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>22</sup> Milbank characterises modernity in the same way, and on the same basis announces its end. Equally, for Milbank, overcoming modernity will require a retrieval of the pre-modern, but this is not a "restoration of a pre-modern Christian position."<sup>23</sup> He maintains that Patristic and Mediaeval 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>24</sup> In consequence, "There can be no relapse towards pre-modernity; rather any retrieval must assume a post-modern, metacritical guise."<sup>25</sup> This is where Derrida becomes essential to the work.

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20 Milbank, "Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics": 325.

21 See Milbank, "Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics": 329-41, idem, "Can a Gift be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic," *Modern Theology* 11 (1995): 132 ff., and idem, "The Soul of Reciprocity, Part One."

22 Jean-Luc Marion, *God without being: Hors-texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991) xx-xxi.

23 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* 2.

24 Milbank, "The Linguistic Turn as a Theological Turn," in idem, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1997) 85. See also his "Pleonasm, Speech and Writing," *ibid.* 79.

25 Milbank, "A Critique of the Theology of the Right," *The Word Made Strange* 7.

The relation of the Radically Orthodox to Derrida is deeply ambiguous. His anti-foundationalism is embraced in order to free theology from the modern secular rationality which has evaluated it contemptuously and placed it at the margins. They follow his refusal to allow identical repetition. Derrida's "the real as linguistic"<sup>26</sup> becomes part of making humanity essentially poetic. 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 postmodern nihilism include: (1) more daringly than Marion, but in accord with a change in his thought in the last decade, the restoration of ontology, (2) in common with Marion the refusal of henology,<sup>27</sup> (3) receptivity to a tradition (Christian Platonism). The attempt to save ontology is made by such a total reduction of philosophy that a theological ontology replaces it. Whereas Marion refuses the Neoplatonic One for the sake of the Good and charity, Radical Orthodoxy supposes that its theological ontology allows it both to have God as Being, and also to embrace enthusiastically the theurgic religion that went with strongly henological Platonism. Milbank's Platonic philosophy, refounded in Christian myth, will allow him to have (as against Marion): "the Platonic Good, reinterpreted by Christianity as identical with Being,"<sup>28</sup> The receptivity is set in opposition to a Nietzschean projected objectivity with its roots in a Cartesian and Kantian subjectivity. Here Derrida serves to deconstruct the identity of the modern subject and its constitution of a matching rational object: "the reduction of being to the 'object' whose existence does not exceed the extent to which it is known by the subject."<sup>29</sup> So Derrida's essential strategy is employed, but his nihilism denounced.

In sum, Radical Orthodoxy operates as if, in virtue of its radically orthodox Christianity, the law of non-contradiction did not apply to it. Nothing need be refused, the long philosophical Lent of modern Christianity is past, the austere disciplines of Karl Barth, as well as the metaphysical cautiousness of Karl Rahner belong to the last millennium. A strategy has been discovered by which philosophy is reduced to nothing, and then retrieved as ontology and metaphysics. Moreover, this is a philosophy already well known to the Church: Platonism, especially as transformed among the later Neoplatonists. At the hands of this movement, it will suffer a further postmodern metamorphosis in which all the Platonic dualisms will disappear. The leading trio tells us that "the modern bastard dualisms" are now transcended by their Anglo-Catholic Affirming Catholicism.<sup>30</sup> Milbank asserts:

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26 Milbank, *The Word Made Strange* 2.

27 Jean-Luc Marion, *L'idole et la distance, Cinq études* (Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 1977) 185; idem, *Entretien with Janicaud, Heidegger en France*, ii, 216.

28 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* 295-96.

29 Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing* 70, and see chapter 2, generally.

30 Milbank, Pickstock, Ward (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy, A New Theology* 2, the Introduction to this volume is the best statement known to me of their capacity to overcome all previous limits and to have all the contradictories at once.

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>31</sup>

This radicalised 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. For example, they write about Marion because with him they have points of common interest at which to enter contemporary Christian philosophical theology. However, they show that his positions destructively turn into their opposites, because he assumes what he opposes. In the end there is for the Radically Orthodox no passage from within their solipsistic completeness.

#### IV. TELLING STORIES ABOUT THE PAST WITHOUT MODERN TRUTHFULNESS

For Radical Orthodoxy, there is an essential relation to the past and that connection is poetic. In history, we connect with a pre-modern tradition where we find what we now experience as lack or recollect as forgotten. Philosophy as metaphysics is replaced by a narrative about our history, *poiêsis* as storytelling. The past is scoured to find what we have lost and texts are read so as to suit reason subordinated to desire, to *praxis* and *poesis*. Having over-passed the "secular standards of scientific truth or normative rationality," we can join in the origination of reality.<sup>32</sup> The old ontology has been replaced with a post-Derridean "logontic" in which the divine and human are interchangeable. Man creates his linguistic world so totally, that, as Milbank puts it: "man as an *original* creator" participates "in some measure in creation *ex nihilo*."<sup>33</sup>

Milbank represents the foundational Christian story as a myth of universal ontological peace, forming a whole with the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. He contradistinguishes it from the primal Greek *agon* which he sees as retrieved in postmodern nihilism.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, there is nothing innocent about this origination or anything naïve about these tales. In fact, here we face what I regard as the greatest problem with Radical Orthodoxy and the reason these poets must tell many a lie. Part of what they want to escape in the modern is what they (along with Nietzsche) perceive as its objectification of our past, an alienation by which what is human becomes inhuman. Thus they tell their stories rather than do critical history. For Milbank

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31 Milbank, "'Postmodern Critical Augustinianism'": §37, 234.

32 Ibid.: 225-26.

33 Milbank, "Pleonasm, Speech and Writing," *The Word Made Strange* 79 and "'Postmodern Critical Augustinianism'": §42.

34 For Milbank, Augustine is the pre-eminent Christian teacher here. See *Theology and Social Theory* 294-95, 402-403; idem, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism": *passim*; Kerr, "Simplicity Itself": 307; Burrell, "An Introduction to *Theology and Social Theory*": 325, 328.

historical scholarship is a “finite idol.”<sup>35</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. Their story-telling lays claim to a postmodern metacriticism 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 — though to call critical history a double-edged sword underestimates the number of ways it cuts.<sup>36</sup> Radical Orthodoxy depends on the Enlightenment development of this critical spirit — which has, of course, earlier origins. Without its 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. We find harsh and angry criticism of scientific history in a work he called *The Genealogy of Morals*.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, the work depends on the critical freedom by which we can recover what is prior to the moral opposition of good and evil consummated in modern truthfulness. Transformed into the will to power, morality determines our relation to ourselves and all else. With Radical Orthodoxy, there is simultaneously both a critical reinterpretation of old texts for the sake of the new narrative, and a careless disregard for every discipline of scholarship, so that ideological phantasies or fables about our origins and cultural history pass for theology. What is represented as poetic ecstasy is yet another form of the past pre-packaged for touristic consumption. James Hanvey rightly describes it as another “colonisation” of the philosophical and theological tradition. The addition of what Hanvey calls a sophisticated postmodern “strategy of deception”<sup>38</sup> requires, or at least enables rather than prevents, the commission of the most elementary errors.<sup>39</sup> As in contemporary education, creativity is illiterate.<sup>40</sup>

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35 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* 1.

36 See my “The Bible in a Post-Critical Age,” in *After the Deluge, Essays Towards the Desecularization of the Church*, ed. W. Oddie (London: SPCK, 1987) 41-92.

37 See the third essay, §§ 24-26, one of Nietzsche’s many negative reflections on scientific history.

38 J. Hanvey, “Conclusion: Continuing the Conversation,” in *Radical Orthodoxy? - A Catholic Inquiry* 155 and 164.

39 See N. Lash, “Where does Holy Teaching Leave Philosophy? Questions on Milbank’s Aquinas,” *Modern Theology* 15:4 (1999): 433-444; W.J. Hankey, “Why Philosophy Abides for Aquinas,” *The Heythrop Journal* 42:3 (2001): 329-348.

40 See my “Practical Considerations about Teaching Philosophy and Theology Now,” for *Restoring Faith In Reason, A New Translation of the Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II together with a commentary and discussion*, edited by Laurence Paul Hemming and Susan Frank Parsons (London: SCM Press, 2002) 199-205.

## V. PLATONIC MYTHS

An adequate understanding of Radical Orthodoxy requires sketching the story it tells about the history of western philosophy and theology. For this we must follow their relation to the French philosophers, especially Marion, on whom their writing is parasitic. As noted already, for Milbank, freeing theology from philosophy (and all of us from modernity) demands taking Marion's theological opposition to philosophy to a still more radical extreme. For Milbank "Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics." Criticizing Marion's use of "phenomenological donation to rethink it as Christian charity," he writes that:

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>41</sup>

Crucially, Milbank's embrace and interpretation of Plato is at one with his opposition of philosophy and 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 *poiêsis*. In *After Writing*, Catherine Pickstock celebrates Plato as leading "dialogue ... *into* doxology, which for Plato is our principal human function and language's only possibility of restoration."<sup>42</sup> The Platonism of Milbank and Pickstock is the one most thoroughly developed by Iamblichus and his followers where revelation and theurgy have essential place. In this restoration, John Milbank is satisfied that I am correct in linking him and Pickstock with "the [Pseudo-] Dionysian legacy of theurgic neoplatonism."<sup>43</sup>

Milbank interprets Augustine so as to draw him toward an apophatic Neoplatonism realised in charity and *poiêsis*. He refuses my "contrast of a Porphyrian Augustine and a theurgic [pseudo] Dionysius" in order to remove from Augustine any

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41 Milbank, "Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics": 340-41.

42 Pickstock, *After Writing* 43.

43 J. Milbank, "Intensities," *Modern Theology* 15:4 (October 1999): 445-497 at 485 ("Intensities" is, in part, a response to my "*Theoria versus Poiêsis*" in the same issue.)

trace of what Descartes claimed to find. The self-reflexive and self-certain Augustinian *cogito* is lost in cosmic liturgy. Milbank asserts:

Augustine also places the soul within the cosmos and in the *Confessions* finally realises his own self hood through losing it in cosmic liturgy. Nor is the Augustinian *cogito* Cartesian, for in Augustine our certainty of our own being, life and understanding is a certainty of intentional opening to these things, which are taken as innately transcendental realities, exceeding their instantiation in us. Thus no *res cogitans*, enclosed upon itself, is here reflexively established.<sup>44</sup>

If every trace of autonomous reason and of *theoria* apart from a performed reception of the poetic word can be overcome, we have a way of escape from the oppositions imposed both within pre-modern philosophy and religion (even Christian) and modernity. For Milbank and Pickstock, in the ancient world the secularizing immanentism of the pre-Socratics is overcome by Plato understood through late Neoplatonism. They believe that the problem is not philosophy, metaphysics, and ontology absolutely, if their substantiality and their quest for autonomy relative to myth could be eliminated. In fact, an independent philosophy is a vain imagination, even the desire for rational self-completeness originates in myth. *Poiêsis* as mythmaking 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>45</sup> What makes postmodern thought nihilistic is its neopaganism. Milbank envisages in their stead "another ontology" which is "another philosophy" and "another metaphysics."<sup>46</sup> The autonomy of philosophy would disappear. In its place there would be: "A theological ontology, not an ontology independent of a divinely illumined access to the divine."<sup>47</sup> Inscribed within the Christian rather than within the Greek *mythos*, this metaphysics would be properly Christian.

Milbank's "other philosophy," 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 and radicalizing of what they did, the ancient Greek notions of "presence, substance, the idea, the subject, causality, thought-before-expression, and realist representation" would be criticized. Thus discarded are those notions which by his account (and Nietzsche's) found the secular reason and the

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<sup>44</sup> Milbank, "Intensities": note 142, 497.

<sup>45</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* 295.

<sup>46</sup> Milbank, "Can a Gift be Given?" 152 and 137 with 132 and "A Critique of the Theology of the Right," 29.

<sup>47</sup> Milbank, "The Linguistic Turn as a Theological Turn," 100.

autonomous self characterizing modernity. These eliminated, Platonism reinterpreted by Christianity, can be retrieved.<sup>48</sup>

Here, as also with the Radical Orthodox interpretation of Neoplatonism, the problem is that more than half of the story is left out. As well as making myth in conformity with the truth – which is the privileged possession of philosophy – and using myths regarded as unfalsifiable rather than true, Plato had also a profoundly critical relation to myth. Although my title comes from Aristotle, he is following Plato who found that both the form and content of poetry lied.<sup>49</sup> In contrast with the Neoplatonists, who derived their allegorizing strategy from the Stoics, Plato rejects the hypothesis of allegory that myth conceals truth “since for him truth can only be revealed in philosophical discourse.”<sup>50</sup> Scholars use Plato to define *mythos* relative to *logos* precisely because he is regarded as having set up this opposition. An examination of the actual forms in which Patristic and Mediaeval Christian Neoplatonism occurred, will discover that the elements Milbank desired to take from Neoplatonism and those he rejected 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 *poiësis* 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 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 Neoplatonic hero of Radical Orthodoxy, Iamblichus.<sup>51</sup> The “divine” Iamblichus is all at once a ritualistic priest, a theologian, and a philosopher. He knows the difference between these roles and their necessary mutual interconnection. 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

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48 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* 295-96.

49 See Plato, *Republica* II, 379b-381c; *Timaeus* 29c-30a; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.2, 983a4, and *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7, 1177b30-35.

50 Luc Brisson, *Plato the Myth Maker*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Gerard Naddaf (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 127; see Graeme Nicholson, “The Ontology of Plato’s *Phaedrus*,” *Dionysius* 16 (1998): 9-28 for a nuanced discussion of the relations of myth, rhetoric, and dialectic.

51 See Hankey, “Why Philosophy Abides for Aquinas;” and idem, “Self and Cosmos in Becoming Deiform: Neoplatonic Paradigms for Reform by Self-Knowledge from Augustine to Aquinas” for *Ecclesia Semper Reformanda: Vatican II, Aggiornamento, and Church Reform before Modernity*, A Conference on the Fortieth Anniversary of Vatican II at Fordham University, August 2-4, 2002, to be published in the Proceedings by Fordham University Press.

to the gracious activity of the divine toward us.<sup>52</sup> 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 Neoplatonism or to its Arabic, Jewish, and Christian successors, can only derive from careless ignorance or fantasy.

Recent years have seen more and more rehabilitations of ancient and medieval thinkers by Radical Orthodoxy as its colonization of history progresses. The yoke under which a thinker must pass in order to enter this empire—as also the Roman—is that each of them surrender what is specific to his or her thought. As we have seen, Augustine is reconciled to Iamblichus, so that union with the divine for both is by way of joining in the cosmic *poiêsis*.<sup>53</sup> Aristotle has now 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! When representing his teaching on the senses there is an exaggerated emphasis on the priority of touch, which turns out to be the basis of human immortality! Flesh as self-sensing has replaced soul. Motion replaces life in the Aristotelian definitions. The purpose of these is to make sensed and sensing reciprocal—non-living objects have thus been eliminated. In common with Heidegger and the same Christian postmodern revivers of aspects of Neoplatonism whom Milbank criticises (e.g. Marion and Michael Henry), the First Principle and sensual life are immediately united, i.e. without the mediation of soul or mind.<sup>54</sup> The great aim is to get rid of reason, identified with modernity, and to replace it with what we might call an incarnational Neoplatonism.<sup>55</sup>

At the cost of a thoroughly tendentious reading,<sup>56</sup> *Truth in Aquinas* by Pickstock and Milbank dissolves Aquinas' Aristotelian noetic into intellectual intuition and Augustinian illumination in order, anachronistically, to find a way around Kant and to reduce philosophy to what they call "theology proper." Metaphysics is collapsed into sacred doctrine. In truth, Thomas is moving in the other direction.<sup>57</sup>

## VI. WHAT TO DO ABOUT ONTO-THEOLOGY

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52 W.J. Hankey, "Philosophy as Way of Life for Christians? Iamblichian and Porphyrian Reflections on Religion Virtue and Philosophy in Thomas Aquinas," *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* in press,

53 For this element in Iamblichus, see Iamblichus, *De Vita Pythagorica* 18.86; 28.137 and idem, *Protrepticos* 3.10, 47,25-28; 3.11, 58,8-19.

54 For a representation of this pattern in Heidegger, see Jean-Marc Narbonne, *Hénologie, Ontologie et Ereignis (Plotin-Proclus-Heidegger)* L'âne d'or (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2001) 278-82, for Marion and Henry, see W.J. Hankey, "French Neoplatonism in the 20th century," *Animus* 4 (1999) an electronic journal at <http://www.mun.ca/animus/1999vol4/hankey4.htm>

55 Milbank "The Soul of Reciprocity, Part Two": 490-505.

56 Lash, "Where does Holy Teaching Leave Philosophy?": 433-444 and Hankey, "Why Philosophy Abides for Aquinas": 336-45.

57 J. Milbank and C. Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, Radical Orthodoxy (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) 22-24, 51, note 8 at 118 and note 103 at 126.

Continuing the metanarrative requires that we remind ourselves of the Heideggerian notion of metaphysics as onto-theology.<sup>58</sup> It proposed that, when revelation is mixed with Greek philosophy, God is understood through, or better, enclosed in, the historical horizons given by a succession of notions of being. The Christianization of God within this metaphysical framework brings us ultimately to the will to power and to the death of God. Metaphysical theology confuses Being with beings, and turns God into a super being. As the thingliest of things, God becomes comprehensible within a particular conception of being. Looking at reality from the divine perspective, we gain a rational hold on the world. As Christians, we are related to being as *ens creatum* from the side of the Creator's will. This relation reduces being so understood to manipulable things. In sum: God, who must conform to the requirements of human reason dies and, when reason itself belongs to the will to power, Heidegger judges that: "The earth itself can show itself only as the object of assault, an assault that, in human willing, establishes itself as unconditional objectification. Nature appears everywhere—because willed from out of the essence of Being—as the object of technology."<sup>59</sup> Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, as generally understood by the NeoScholasticism in which Heidegger was trained, is the classical locus of onto-theology.

Historians of philosophy have developed very telling criticisms of Heidegger's notion as a history of philosophy or metaphysics.<sup>60</sup> Theologians have a far more ambiguous relation to it: on the one hand, many are attracted to its destruction of philosophy in general and metaphysics in particular, because after the manner of one of the first Christian reactions to Heidegger, that of Rudolf Bultmann, in its wake Christianity remains only as preaching, faith, and life. These remain among the last enthusiasts for Heidegger's history.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, many others, and some of the those who would like to have done with philosophy, do not desire, or cannot bear, the loss of two millennia of Christian culture, of Christian theology and doctrine (which goes out with the metaphysics), or, indeed, of the philosophical mitigation of the Biblical God—His current manifestations in the Middle East not being universally attractive, certainly they rarely exhibit Him as founding an ontology of universal peace.

According to the Postmodern theological narrative common to Marion and Milbank, the crucial turn to onto-theology is now no longer where Heidegger placed it

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58 The idea is accessible to English readers in Martin Heidegger, "The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics," English translation in *Identity and Difference*, trans. J. Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1969) 42-76; also of use are idem, "The Word of Nietzsche: 'God Is Dead'," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. W. Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) 53-112; and idem, *The End of Philosophy*, trans. J. Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1969); Hemming, *Heidegger's Atheism* gives excellent accounts of the doctrine, its history, and purpose within Heidegger's writings.

59 Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche," 100.

60 See the *Actes and Conférences plénières de XXVIIe Congrès de l'Association des Sociétés de Philosophie de Langue Française. La métaphysique: son histoire, sa critique, ses enjeux*, published in two volumes edited by Jean-Marc Narbonne and Luc Langlois and published by Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin and Les Presses de l'Université Laval in 1999 and 2000 and Narbonne, *Hénologie, Ontologie et Ereignis*, my "Why Heidegger's 'History' of Metaphysics is Dead," and R. Imbach, "Heidegger et la philosophie médiévale," *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 49 (2002): 426-34.

<sup>61</sup> Jean-Luc Marion and Laurence Hemming are among these.

in Plato and Aristotle, nor even in Augustine and Aquinas, but does not befall us until the 14<sup>th</sup> century and Scotistic fideistic metaphysics “independent of theology.”<sup>62</sup> This, when developed by Suárez and Descartes, Marion and Milbank understand to be at the root of modern deformity. Marion followed Étienne Gilson in finding the Scotistic transformation of scholasticism by Suárez as a “univocist drift”<sup>63</sup> which leads in Descartes to “a rationality not theologically assured by Christian Revelation, but metaphysically founded on the humanity of ‘men strictly men’.”<sup>64</sup>

Once this narrative is accepted, Marion and Milbank have been able to extend the history of Christian Neoplatonism to include Aquinas and thus to exempt him from the charge of writing onto-theology. Marion did this in a recantation by which Thomas’ philosophical theology ceased to be *onto-théo-logie*, imprisoning God beyond the power of revelation within our conceptualization of being, and became instead *théo-onto-logie*.<sup>65</sup> For Marion, the acceptance of Thomas’ position on this point requires noting that for him God, not being, is the proper subject matter of theology; being is the subject of metaphysics.<sup>66</sup> The project has recently been continued and deepened by Marion and others, partly through keeping the triple aspects of metaphysics separate both in Aristotle and in his successors.<sup>67</sup> According to Marion, St Thomas, in his following of the Dionysian tradition, has “God precede entity and beings (as already was the case for Plato).”<sup>68</sup> “Aquinas was able to exempt God from being, understood not only as it is

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62 Milbank, “Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics”: 45; idem, “Can a Gift be Given?” 137ff. where Milbank considers how, for Marion, theology’s “exit from metaphysics” has to do with “his relationship to Heidegger.” For a thorough critical consideration of the account of the supposed Scotist and Ockhamist rupture in the relations of metaphysics and theology by Radical Orthodoxy, of its adequacy as an account of the history of philosophy, and of its usefulness for dealing with Heidegger’s onto-theological reading of philosophy, see Adrian Pabst, “De la chrétienté à la modernité? Lecture critique des thèses de *Radical Orthodoxy* sur la rupture scotiste et ockhamienne et sur le renouveau de la théologie de saint Thomas d’Aquin,” *Revue des sciences théologiques et philosophiques* 86 (2002): 561-599.

63 On the crucial role of Suárez in Marion’s account of the rupture between the modern and the premodern see Graham Ward, “Introducing Jean-Luc Marion,” *New Blackfriars* 76:895 (July/August, 1995): 318-21. This analysis is also picked up by John Milbank, “Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics”: 40 and by Pickstock, *After Writing* 61-62, 122ff. Jean-François Courtine, *Suarez et le system de la métaphysique*, Épiméthée (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990) is classic, for a survey of the literature focusing on Suárez see Robert Miner, “Suárez as Founder of Modernity: Reflections on a *topos* in recent Historiography,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 18:1 (2000): 17-35.

64 Jean-Luc Marion, “The Essential Incoherence of Descartes’ Definition of Divinity,” translated by Frederick Van de Pitte, in *Essays on Descartes’ Mediations*, edited by Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 306 and 297.

65 Marion, “Saint Thomas d’Aquin”: 33 and 65. In it Marion notes that he was already moving in this direction in the 1991 “Preface to the English Edition” of his *Dieu sans l’être*. Marion does not designate the Dionysian theology as Neoplatonic, this is because he wants to eliminate philosophy from it. There is a useful summary in B.J. Shanley, “St. Thomas, Onto-theology and Marion,” *The Thomist* 60 (1996): 617-625.

66 Marion, “Saint Thomas d’Aquin”: 37-41. I treat Marion’s argument and his difference from Milbank in “Why Philosophy Abides for Aquinas”: 341-45.

67 See J.-L. Marion, “La science toujours recherchée et toujours manquante,” (13-36) and other of the principal addresses published in *La métaphysique: son histoire, sa critique, ses jeux*.

68 Marion, “Saint Thomas d’Aquin”: 37.

understood in metaphysics, but also in the sense of onto-theology.”<sup>69</sup> “Being is thought beginning from God, but not the inverse.”<sup>70</sup> Milbank spots “ambiguity in Marion” in respect to metaphysics in theology, and referring to his recantation *vis-à-vis* Aquinas, raises the question whether, for Marion: “Is Aquinas, a ‘metaphysician’ in a negative sense?”<sup>71</sup> From Milbank’s perspective, Marion remains too reticent in respect to metaphysics. Milbank reasserts his strategy, in contrast to Marion’s, to re-establish ontology and metaphysics by totally “evacuating” philosophy as metaphysics so that “metaphysics collapses into *sacra doctrina*.”<sup>72</sup>

For Milbank, metaphysics and ontology have two senses. One, “the post-Suarezian 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>73</sup> The second sense, which applies to Patristic and Mediaeval theology, is looser and wider. Here “the inherited general categories for being were both contaminated and revised by the consideration of narrative event.”<sup>74</sup> In virtue of a “gnoseological circularity between ontology and narrative ... the event of revelation both interrupted and completed ontology itself.”<sup>75</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>76</sup> Metaphysics, both necessary and possible, returns so completely that “we are right to trust in a limited intellectual insight into the structures of being” and correct to affirm, with Hegel, that “to choose this speculation is therefore to choose reason itself.”<sup>77</sup> This brings the story back to the point at which we entered it: the characterisation of modernity. We can now deal with my accusation that this narrative is a poetic lie.

## VII. A POETIC LIE

As Plato detected in respect to the poetic theologians, Radically Orthodox lying has two aspects, one has to do with form, the other with content. Further, the lying is necessary.

The first aspect is formal. Milbank describes his theological writing as “composing a new theoretical music.”<sup>78</sup> Theory belongs to composition and is not separable from it. The requirement that we join in the cosmic and divine *poiêsis*,

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69 Ibid. 58.

70 Ibid.: “Penser l’esse à partir de Dieu, mais non l’inverse (à la manière de la *metaphysica* et de Heidegger ...).”

71 Milbank “The Soul of Reciprocity, Part Two”: 488.

72 Milbank, “Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics”: 341 and J. Milbank and C. Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, Radical Orthodoxy (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) 39.

73 Milbank “The Soul of Reciprocity, Part Two”: 487.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid. 486-87.

76 Ibid. 488-89.

77 Ibid. 489.

78 Milbank, *The Word Made Strange* 1, and see idem, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism”: §8, 227 and §42, 237.

governed not by truth but by desire, means that there can be no theoretical distance or objectivity. Theory occurs as a necessarily incomplete moment within *praxis*. Christian *poiêsis* restores the *sensus eminentior* of Scripture:

*Poiêsis* ... is the ceaseless re-narrating and 'explaining' of human history under the sign of the cross. To act at all is to re-narrate, and to act in the Church is to take this re-narration not as transparent and complete within supposed 'bounds' of our finitude (the Kantian modern), nor yet as ecstatically indeterminate (the sceptical post-modern), but rather as an utterly concrete allegorical outline...<sup>79</sup>

The divisions between letter and allegory, between listening and telling, between speech and act, between *theoria* and *poiêsis*, revelation and metaphysics are overcome. Milbank asserts that "Like nihilism, Christianity can, should, embrace the differential flux."<sup>80</sup> Nonetheless, Milbank fears the nihilism which goes with postmodern *poiêsis*. He seeks to avoid it by finding himself in a tradition, retelling the old old story and singing the song which the cosmic liturgy is performing. The creativity is ecstatic possession and surrender. He writes that Christian faithfulness will require a poetic surrender to the musical flow which, as against static spatialization, stresses "'temporal occurrence through us'."<sup>81</sup>

Such surrender is impossible, in my judgment, precisely because of its anti-modern function. For Radical Orthodoxy, telling tales about the past is the only way to establish its positions. Being totally and completely opposed to any metaphysical foundations for theology, it can only persuade by its storytelling, which is identical (it says) to its activity as Church. When theology is *poesis*, Christian community is "a *concentus musicus*,"<sup>82</sup> "what God is like."<sup>83</sup> Indeed, the Church herself is "the second difference" within the Trinity. Milbank writes:

God involves not just the first difference of expressive articulation of content (inseparable from content), but also the second difference of interpretation of expression (inseparable from expression) ... God as Trinity is therefore himself community, and even 'community in process' infinitely realised, beyond any conceivable opposition between 'perfect act' and 'perfect potential'.<sup>84</sup>

What belongs to theory is self-consciously constructed within *poiêsis*, *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, the nihilist gap has already opened.

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79 Milbank, "A Critique of the Theology of the Right," 32.

80 Milbank, "'Postmodern Critical Augustinianism'": §8, 227.

81 Milbank, *The Word Made Strange* 44 and 142.

82 Milbank, "'Postmodern Critical Augustinianism'": §10, 228.

83 *Ibid.*, §11, 228.

84 *Ibid.*, 233-34.

Radical Orthodoxy moves back and forth between two poles. On the one side, there is a use of the resources of modern critical history which frees it from its self-consciously Anglican traditions in order to establish new authorities, new readings, and to confute its adversaries. On the other side, there are elementary, sloppy misunderstandings, and polemical, grossly selective misrepresentations. If this did nothing more than reflect the long-standing ignorance of the history of philosophy and theology in the English-speaking world, and especially in the places where Radical Orthodoxy was born, it might escape the suspicion of a nihilistic cynicism. However, what recommends this movement is precisely its French historical and philosophical sophistication. Its self-conscious refusal of truthfulness prevents the disciplines which activity within the modern scholarly tradition requires.

The other aspect of the poetic lying has to do with the content. As just said, crucial elements in the story are either elementary and sloppy misunderstandings, or polemical, grossly selective misrepresentations. To make a list would be take too long. I shall only remind you of some “tall tales” we have encountered. 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.” In Aristotle neither can the moving and the sensate 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. 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, belonging to the nature of immortal mind, even when our being, understanding and loving are directed to God, and act in and by God’s own trinitarian life.<sup>85</sup> In Milbank and Pickstock the Cartesian *cogito* is falsely characterised in order to make the contrast with Augustine sharper than it is, and the self-reflexivity of the Augustinian *mens* is forgotten.<sup>86</sup> Aquinas does not collapse metaphysics into revealed theology nor revert to an Augustinian intellectual intuition. My list includes none of the problematic characterisations of philosophy and theology from Kant to the present which would require more knowledge than mine to judge.

Radical Orthodoxy’s lying is necessary. We could call it “compulsive,” because the anti-modern character of its postmodernity require it. In fact, there is little postmodern about Radical Orthodoxy, if we mean by this a stance beyond the modern civil wars. Mostly we witness another version of reactionary Christian hatred and fear of Enlightenment reason. The truth about our past cannot be told from within this polemic. When the pre-modern, which contains that by which we made ourselves

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85 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.

86 See the comparisons of Descartes and Augustine at Z. Janowski, *Index Augustino-Cartésien: Textes et Commentaire*, Histoire de la philosophie (Paris: Vrin, 2000) 22-23, 56-67, 82-95 with the subsequent commentary and W.J. Hankey, “Between and Beyond Augustine and Descartes: More than a Source of the Self,” *Augustinian Studies* 32:1 (2001): 65-88 at 67-74.

modern, is known only in opposition to it, truth about history is the first victim of this 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 all history is governed by a logic which 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 *poiêsis* is grounded in the disciplines of theoretical truthfulness. To leave these out turns *poiêsis* toward the very nihilistic arbitrariness it claims to avoid. Postmodern *poiêsis* can only escape nihilism by acquiring the disciplines of contemplation. Radical Orthodoxy has not achieved the return to a pre-modern integrity in such a way as to bypass the oppositions of Ancient, Mediaeval, and Modern spiritual forms. Refusal of finitude, struggle, denial, real division does not unite us with the divine *creatio ex nihilo*. Instead it transports us to Fantasyland.

W.J. Hankey  
Carnegie Professor of Classics  
King's College and Dalhousie University  
[hankeywj@dal.ca](mailto:hankeywj@dal.ca)  
[www.dal.ca/~claswww/KeyfileHankey.html](http://www.dal.ca/~claswww/KeyfileHankey.html)