

## **A conversation with Robert Wuthnow and John Milbank**

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Robert Wuthnow and John Milbank appear to be entirely at cross purposes. Wuthnow, the sociologist, has an abiding concern for the place of the church in American life. His emphasis, like that of many sociologists, has been on uncovering the practices of religious people to understand them better. Wuthnow begins with the practices of people, and as we shall see, concludes in a rudimentary theology. John Milbank, on the other hand, makes his case on the overthrow of secular sociology and the reestablishment of a particular, Christian sociology. Milbank begins with theology and ends with practices. Are they entirely in conflict with one another? Despite the judgments of some critics, I do not think so.<sup>1</sup> The fact that both authors conclude their concerns with a focus on the church, as a concrete embodiment of Christian practices, leads me to believe that they not only have room for conversation, but also for mutual illumination. In the end, I believe their conversation could bear fruit for the faithful practices of the local congregation.

### **ROBERT WUTHNOW ON THE MIDDLE-CLASS CHURCH**

Robert Wuthnow begins his book, *The Crisis in the Churches*, with a reluctant protest: "Some topics are ones you'd just as soon not write about. This one was like that for me."<sup>2</sup> The problem? The apparent financial decline of the church in America. Wuthnow's methods involve standard sociological methods including surveys and interviews. Like all reputable sociologists, his starting point concentrates more on what people have to say (and consequently, believe) and less on speculation. Wuthnow's results point to the clear middle-class dominance of the American church. He raises the alarm about the gradual economic slippage of the middle class and worries what the consequences may be for the church as we know it.

I do not believe we would want to dispute Wuthnow's research findings. But because his concluding theological remarks spring from an abiding concern about an American middle-class church, and from issues of poverty and social injustice, we need first to look into the underpinnings of his arguments. Wittgenstein once said, "Tell me how you are searching, and I will tell you what you are searching for."<sup>4</sup> Taking a key from Wittgenstein then, I will look further into the understanding of the place of sociology and religion in Wuthnow's work. I am not disputing his results, but rather questioning whether his own theological conclusions necessarily follow from his research.

Wuthnow sets the scene for the church malaise he uncovers when he writes that, "We sense that our wants are spiraling out of control. We know that there is more to life than having nice things." He then adds, "For many of us, a religious factor may also prompt our misgivings. We are dimly aware of biblical teachings contrasting the worship of God and mammon . . . Secular as our culture is, 71 percent still agree that 'being greedy is a sin against God'."4 Clearly, Americans are conflicted over the pursuit of material wealth yet, as he explains, are uncomfortable with religious teachings that they "dimly" remember. At first hearing, Wuthnow shows an internal logic to his discovery-is that not the sort of tension we all feel? Do not his remarks uncover a key duplicity in our faith and economic worlds? I believe it is the very concept of a tension that requires more thought.

Wuthnow earlier wrote that,

If we are to understand the peculiar links between religious commitment and economic justice in society, therefore, we must also locate the cultural values that work against taking responsibility for the poor-some of which are also reinforced by religious commitments. Together these forces channel the ways in which responsibilities to the poor are expressed. They do not render religious people mute or ineffective. But they do direct their energies and shape their responses.5

Here we have a hint of Wuthnow's central tension-that religion is not alone in shaping the minds of people. It is one of at least two influences competing for our understanding: the other is economics.

Wuthnow's concept of the generation of these respective forces illustrates the origins of the tension. He writes, "I show how clergy-as professional producers of culture in religious organizations-are influenced by cultural assumptions that derive from their own theological understandings and from the implicit assumptions embedded in middleclass life."6 Wuthnow reads a conflict between religious culture and middle-class economic life: "religion" and the "middle class" are competing cultural spheres. Each sphere both receives and produces claims on the same people, but with different expectations.

Wuthnow's contention that culture is both received and produced is critical to his understanding of religion and economics. Not only do these cultural claims grow independently but they have their own sets of rules. Two (or more) cultural claims can appeal to the same people, who struggle to practice two independent (and perhaps conflicting) sets of values.

Wuthnow confronts such conflicts when he writes, "Money and morality are kept in separate compartments. Our culture encourages us to think this way. Money is allegedly value-free. It is simply a convenient mechanism of social exchange.

Indeed 68 percent in the survey agreed that 'money is one thing, moral and values are completely separate.'<sup>7</sup> Wuthnow recognizes full well that the division of money and morality into separate compartments is problematic and, perhaps, even the source of our "spiritual malaise." He says earlier that, "The more pervasive problem may be that self-interest encourages us to think more in terms of choice, freedom, options, and lifestyles than in terms of responsibilities."<sup>9</sup>

I believe his assessment of lifestyle is just right. Still, I do question his assumption that societal development necessarily involves conflict. Do we need to agree that different claims, such as religion and economics, will necessarily compete for our attentions?

Wuthnow's flash point, if you will, for the conflict of religious and secular middle-class values centers around his perception of unjust treatment of the poor by the middle class. Wuthnow worries that "Middle-class churches ultimately may be too deeply embedded in the dominant social order to challenge it very much."<sup>10</sup> It is not that middle-class people do not have concerns for the poor and disenfranchised—they do. The question in Wuthnow's mind is whether these middle-class values and religious values can see their way clear to a peaceful resolution. Middle-class people are responsive to the needs of the poor, he points out, but that responsiveness is usually contingent on the poor adopting middle-class values. Wuthnow writes, "True empathy requires more than remaking other people to conform to our own image. It requires rethinking our own identity as well. The poor may be a mirror for the middle class. But that mirror should register the faults of the middle class as well as its virtues."<sup>11</sup>

It seems clear that our economic enmeshment has already largely won the day in Wuthnow's understanding. Does he highlight economics because of our treatment of the poor? Is that because we have drawn back from our religious commitments? I suspect that is so. But in the course of the book, there is another, equally fundamental problem that Wuthnow points to, and that is the survival of the middle-class church. He points not only to the economic decline of the middle class (undermining the very forces that make them "middle class") but also the middle class's gradual withdrawal of economic support for the church. Not only has the American church's enmeshment created intolerance and injustice, it has actually caused the middle class to withdraw its support. What is the church to do?

Wuthnow's response to this clash between religious and middle-class values may be telling. He believes that, "Something can be done about this crisis and the churches can retain their vitality, but only if they regain their mission to serve the needs of the middle class itself and only if the clergy speak more clearly on the ways in which faith connects with the overall issues of our time and our resources."<sup>12</sup> Clearly Wuthnow's concept of the church's "faith" bears the burden of proof—it must demonstrate its relevance in these competing spheres. That problem aside, one more troubling factor is introduced: the so-called "needs" of the middle class.

What are those needs? From where do they stem? What are their underpinnings? Are they needs independent of middle-class culture itself? In the course of Wuthnow's book, survival of the middle class is clearly one of the implied needs, and with that survival, the contingent survival of the church as we know it in the United States. I remember my shock of recognition when Jim Wallis argued that Jonathan Schell's book, *The Fate of the Earth*, might be an example of God's judgment on our abuse of this world. While I too, as most in the United States, would bemoan the passing of the middle class, can we say unreflectively that it would not be God's judgment on a church founded only largely on the middle class, that, by Wuthnow's own observation, has done poorly on issues of poverty and social injustice? Sadly, this question never gets a full treatment.

Wuthnow's treatment of middle-class needs however, does get a good deal of attention, attention that seems very reflexive to me. He acknowledges much the same when he says,

Arguing that churches need to better understand the needs of the middle class, therefore, is likely to seem hopelessly parochial, if not self-serving as well. It seems to focus attention back on ourselves rather than on others. Yet I believe this is where the problem lies. The churches are in crisis because they have not understood the middle class and have not focused effectively on meeting its needs.<sup>13</sup>

There we have it: The middle class, caught in the tensions of its own received and created cultural needs, perhaps even the "need" of its spiraling materialism, and its economic decline, is in trouble. The church, as an independent religious culture, must address those "needs." Why should the church address them? Certainly Wuthnow believes that part of the reason is to correct social injustice and poverty. But what of economics? Has the economy no responsibility to the middle class and the poor? And finally, and most painfully, we must ask whether, in addressing the economic needs, we are failing to meet religious "needs." Does not the religious sphere have claim to "needs" as well?

Wuthnow apparently shares these concerns. Worried for the clergy as cultural producers, he writes:

The economic realm is sufficiently alien-sufficiently troublesome-that it is a source of special frustration for many members of the clergy. They feel it is difficult to make a difference because they are up against an entire economic and cultural system . . . The sense that one is waging a losing battle is also a source of frustration to many clergy. They feel the value system of Christianity is fundamentally at odds with the secular culture, especially the latter's emphasis on materialism and economic self-interest.<sup>14</sup>

Yes, Christianity is indeed in conflict with secular culture. Wuthnow will not dispute that. The reason, very simply, is that we are faced with a choice between two "alternatives."

Rather than raising money by selling personal prosperity and happiness, the churches can encourage giving as an alternative to materialism and consumerism . . . the very reason why institutions such as the church exist is to insulate their members from having to jump through hoops defined by other people's standards of popularity. Therefore, clergy and church members alike must think harder about what it means to be the church and why the church should be supported.<sup>15</sup>

Is the very reason why churches exist to "insulate" us from the aggressive demands of the materialist and consumerist culture? Faced with such a blunt question, could we agree? I do not think so. Even the most struggling American Christian might well disagree if the notion were put to them that way. Moreover, if we take Wuthnow's remark at face value, can we not infer that the economic culture has already won the field? How should the embattled church proceed? By being the church, Wuthnow says. "Churches need to combat the allure of Madison Avenue not just by avoiding the issue but by preaching and teaching more pointedly about greed and materialism." <sup>16</sup> The church in Wuthnow's mind becomes not just an alternative, but finds itself in mortal combat!

Still, Wuthnow seems to temper this battle cry with another kind of realism when he writes:

The new paradigm suggests that church vitality is being fueled by competition. As long as the churches try to outdo each other, we need not fear for their survival. This view may be valid for the long term, but it neglects the fact that churches interact more complexly than with the resources in their environment. Even when they compete, they need contributions. And getting contributions requires them to meet parishioners' needs and to make hard choices about what needs to address.<sup>17</sup>

Can Wuthnow have it both ways: Can we have conflict between religious faith and the larger concerns of the economy? More pointedly, if we accept his view of conflicting values, from the vantage of which set of values do we determine the most valid needs? From which vantage point do we choose our criteria of success?

Some time ago, Wuthnow was asked to review a "Trend Scan" report for an Alban Institute Report.

Wuthnow was not hesitant to identify what he sees as the most important of all trends cited: the nation's growing gap between rich and poor and related economic issues. Wuthnow views this trend as profoundly important not only because it

represents individuals in need, but also because of its relevance for the soul of the church. 'This is an issue that churches can easily duck,' he observed; 'this trend has not received enough attention in relationship to others'. 18

Wuthnow is clear—there is potential for increasing economic conflict. My question is, not only what should the church do but how did that crisis come to be? I acknowledge that, if we accept the concept of the compartmentalizing of values into separate spheres, then it is possible for churches to ignore the poor. To be sure, something about the middle class's soul is at stake. We should also be aware that if the present economic arrangements remain unreformed, it becomes possible to ignore the plight of the poor altogether. That is, how strictly may boundaries be drawn between religion and economics? I question whether the fruits of Wuthnow's research are best understood in light of these competing sets of values. But first, let us understand what follows from his insights.

At the end of his book, Wuthnow, who began firmly as a sociologist, concludes as a sort of practical theologian, wondering aloud about what the church, as a religious culture, is to do. Wuthnow makes a number of tentative suggestions about how the church might cross these cultural boundaries. He suggests at one point that if our only criteria for success or faith is that we are "happy," then we have displaced God. He writes, "If religion now influences only our attitudes, then its power has surely been weakened." 19 What can we do as churches (and clergy)? We can attempt to subvert the "vicious cycle" of self interest and reinvigorate that idea of a "calling" as a faithful response.

The subversion of the dominant economic culture's self-interest by the religious culture is fraught with difficulties. Wuthnow points out that people in general care very little for what their churches have to say about the economic realm. Church membership and attendance is an on-again, off-again affair at best.<sup>20</sup> Wuthnow argues in the introduction to *Crisis* that the spiritual crisis is not in wallets or budgets but in the "hearts" of the congregation. And yet, though we might be heartened ourselves by this appeal to faith, the bottom line is the "clergy's understanding of the needs and desires of the members lives." Nevertheless, once again in an effort to have it both ways, he continues: "It [the crisis] lies in a fundamental unwillingness on the part of the clergy to confront the teachings within their own confessional heritage."<sup>21</sup>

Does Wuthnow show us how things really are? I suspect that his tools and methods are sound; people do talk and think the way he reports they do. He has exposed and enlightened our understanding of the terrible conflict between our economic interests and our faith. But in the end, I must question his description of this conflict as a result of competing cultural values. Each sphere is held to be independent; each, apparently, individually valid. He leaves me wondering, whether, if current economic arrangements have already taken the upper hand, should the church placate those created needs in order to assure its survival? Other questions remain: Are those needs only tied to the middle-class church's survival? Should there be survival at (nearly) any economic cost? And finally, if one accepts Wuthnow's notion of competing spheres, from which sphere should a Christian determine the truth? These are questions for which I believe

John Milbank has good responses.

## JOHN MILBANK ON CHRISTIAN SOCIOLOGY

Milbank's critics, such as Richard Roberts,<sup>22</sup> believe he is trying to ignore the "real world" of theology and sociology. I believe that instead, Milbank's theology, and his sociology, make the case that the church is the real world, founded on the peaceful polis created by the Trinity. If Milbank avoids the conventional and secular methods of sociology, seeking instead a speculative spiritual sociology, then what does he have to say? And how may we evaluate his work?

One approach to Milbank's sociology can come from an appreciative essay written by Stanley Hauerwas. Hauerwas sees a "necessary" disagreement between the religious and the secular: "Of course, the confrontation between theology and `the secular' cannot be other than conflictual, as hegemonies' narratives, when confronted by their hegemony, always attempt to claim that `peace' is being threatened."<sup>23</sup> While Hauerwas does not come down on the side of an explanation of competing spheres of culture, he does claim that Milbank points to something critical: Narratives are not individually valuable and relative but instead competing in their truth claims. This understanding undercuts claims for cultural relativism (and perhaps some kinds of pluralism). Milbank and Hauerwas recognize that sociology's pursuit of intellectual rigor and its attendant truth claims is every bit as universal as religious truth claims. They necessarily conflict.

Milbank takes his stand for a Christian "sociology" against a secular sociology for because "theology has rightly become aware of the (absolute) degree to which it is a contingent historical construct emerging from, and reacting back upon, particular social practices conjoined with particular semiotic and figural codings."<sup>24</sup> In order to understand Milbank's rich and lapidary argument better, two key terms need to be emphasized: "contingent historical construct" and "particular social practices." Milbank regards at least part of his work to be a kind of historical archaeology-- rereading history, he has once again discovered that the church is contingent upon its own history (received and self read) and therefore cannot be read as another kind of history. No other history, including secular sociology, has a better vantage point of understanding. Moreover, this contingent read of history is reified and underwritten by particular social practices that should not be mistaken for some universalistic religious cultural practices.

Milbank protests early on that, "Secular `scientific' understanding of society was, from the outset, only the self-knowledge of the self-- construction of the secular as power. What theology has forgotten is that it cannot be either contested or learn from this understanding as such, but has either to accept or deny its object."<sup>25</sup> How can we understand what Milbank means about "self-knowledge" and "self-construction"? Without doing his argument too much damage, perhaps we could liken secular sociology to a game created by a child who enjoys all the advantages of creating the rules, and playing by

them as well. Later, we will discover that Milbank regards capitalism in much the same way.

Milbank sees a difference between the Christian understanding of history (informed contingently and particularly) and the secular. The Christian understanding, founded on the Trinity, is profoundly peaceful. The secular, is founded on "violence". He writes:

Christianity . . . recognizes no original violence. It construes the infinite not as chaos, but as a harmonic peace which is yet beyond the circumscribing power of any totalizing reason. Peace no longer depends upon the reduction to the self-identical, but is the sociality of harmonious difference. Violence, by contrast, is always a secondary willed intrusion upon this possible infinite order (which is actual for God).<sup>26</sup>

Here Milbank contends that a sociological practitioner "assumes that there is only this chaos, which cannot be tamed by an opposing transcendent principle, but can be immanently controlled by subjecting it to rules and giving irresistible power to those rules in the form of market economics and sovereign politics."<sup>27</sup> In other words, from Milbank's vantage point, the sociologist sees the world as chaos in need of formation ("cultural production") to give it shape and meaning. But Milbank contends that this project, no matter how secular sociologists might protest, always begins with the understanding that there will and must be violent competition without the formation of these cultural rules. (I read Milbank's use of the term "violence" as more like the natural cataclysm of storm fronts than the use we make of "violence" as an addicting fascination of the media.) Violence (and the resistance to it) becomes, in a strong sense, an organizing principle of culture for the secular sociologist. They believe that forces of market economics and sovereign politics are undergirded by a culture of violence.

Perhaps Milbank's most extraordinary move is his claim that secular social theory is "bound up with the modification or rejection of orthodox Christian positions."<sup>28</sup> He goes on to claim that social theory is a poor reflection of Christian orthodoxy. The fundamental difference is that, while Christianity has a very particular and contingent history, social theories are self created, a project of Enlightenment reason. These two projects, by their very nature, as Hauerwas pointed out, cannot help but conflict. Milbank writes, "Positivist and dialectical traditions, with their corresponding forms of social science derived from the Enlightenment project, tried to defeat the 'particularistic obscurantism' of Judaism and Christianity in the name of the universal."<sup>29</sup>

It is the last point that is among the most deeply troubling for Milbank in my judgment-the move to universalistic understandings. Enlightenment reason seeks to have a view on the world that is (sinfully) "divine"-a superior, value-free perspective. In fact, this reason, in the form of sociology, even goes so far as to "police" our social lives. Religion has a



place in this scheme but only "in functionalist terms as legitimating and sacralizing the common conventions and social unity." Starting from here, Milbank goes on to explain how sociologists like Wuthnow arrived at their understanding of competing spheres:

Through the process of evolution, society becomes differentiated into a series of sub-systems, each providing relatively self-contained 'action frames of reference' with their own norms and their own relative autonomy. These sub-systems remain perfectly discrete from each other, because their symbolic norms operate univocally, as categories defining once and for all a field of possible knowledge and action.<sup>30</sup>

The how of discovery forms what the sociologists discover—religion, market economics, and sovereign politics all have a place, holding at bay the incipient violence of the chaotic world.

This read of creation is troubling enough for Milbank but the particular read of religion under this conceptual scheme is insidious. He writes, "American sociology therefore reveals that, as a secular policing, its secret purpose is to ensure that religion is kept, conceptually, at the margins—both denied influence, and yet acclaimed for its transcendent purity."<sup>31</sup> Can sociology be understood to be this malevolent? It can, especially if it is this particular "American sociology," which marginalizes religion, its competitor for meaning and people's faith, by forcing it into compartments at the edge of our experience. No wonder—if this view holds up—people in the American sociologists' view find themselves at odds end. As Milbank understands it, their respective views of their economic and religious allegiances are the very battleground on which the battle for their loyalties is being fought!

Hauerwas contends that the "liberal" assumption that we can readily, by our own universalistic and individually justifiable reason, choose between market economics and marginalized religion, is critical. "For the liberal assumption that they belong to no community, no narrative, other than the community they themselves have chosen masks the deepest violence of modernity."<sup>32</sup>

Having made this strong and fundamental case against secular sociology, we must be left wondering if there is any place for sociology. Are all secular sociologists driven from the scene? Is not this the kind of "despair" that Roberts claims when he reads Milbank? One might think so. But in fact, in a passage I have not seen quoted by other readers, Milbank makes a surprising but extraordinary move. He writes, "In the dimension of metaphysics and theology therefore, sociology, which I earlier banished, makes a return. But in its proper function as a 'speculative' discourse it does not usurp the historical, in the way it did as 'scientific' discourse."<sup>33</sup> There is a place for sociology, not as a governing and self-created narrative, but as a means of speculating about particular social relationships.

How did sociology find its way back in? By avoiding the sort of universalistic "leveling-down" it normally performs.<sup>34</sup> Instead, if we begin by understanding the particular and historically contingent narrative of the church, this very particularity drives out universalistic reason and secular sociology. But this does not rule out a kind of sociology that exists within the particular narrative of the church. Milbank writes, "From a deconstructive angle . . . the priority of society over religion can always be inverted, and every secular positivism is revealed to be a positivist theology. Given this insight, sociology could still continue, but it would have to redefine itself as a `faith'."<sup>35</sup> In other words, when sociology competes as its own form of positivism against religion, it reveals itself as a kind of "faith."

Here, Milbank makes another extraordinary move. Taking this positivistic sociology on its own terms, he contends that it can be subverted by theology. How? Because "social fact . . . is always subverted by a more radical positivism which recognizes the peculiarity and specificity of religious practice and logic, and in consequence, the impossibility of any serious attempt at either scientific explanation or humanist interpretation."<sup>36</sup> Milbank welcomes sociology back in, but as a speculative discourse not separate from particular religious practices, but as part of religious practices.

Under the auspices of secular sociology, Milbank contends that the "pure-power" politics created by narrative of market economics and sovereign politics has resulted in

a new anthropology which begins with human persons as individuals and yet defines their individuality essentialistically . . . The question then becomes, how did this anthropology ever secure legitimacy in a theological and metaphysical era? The answer is that it was theologically promoted. Dominion as power could only become the human essence, because it was seen as reflecting the divine essence . . .<sup>37</sup>

Secular sociology undermines theology not by questioning its particular history but by co-opting its narrative. Theology (and the church) become the handmaiden of sociology by confusing the exercise of power with the power of God.

This new anthropology, one of competition for scarce resources, arose in part through the efforts of Adam Smith. Milbank argues that the so-called "invisible hand" of the marketplace simply replaces the human-divine relationship known in Christian theology. Milbank's "archaeological excavation" of the process that led up to Smith's "divinization" of the "invisible hand" is long and complex. Milbank writes:

Smith makes it clear that political economy is founded specifically upon that area of morality which is to do with self interest. `Pure benevolence' he avers, is suited only to a non-dependent being, namely God, whereas human beings must take account of the more self-interested virtues of `propriety', which entails habits of economy, industry and discretion,

the judicious spending of our own resources . . . justice which secures private self-interest is the most interested' virtue and benevolence the most 'disinterested'. . . .38

God alone can be purely concerned for the well-being of the poor. In a real sense, our first duty is to ourselves, and naturally (in the strongest sense of the term) to our best interest. Only after that can we calculate our relationship to those in need of benevolence.

This calculated relationship, based on individualism and self interest, results in a new "theodicy." Treating market economics as a form of "divine ordering" of chaos (as in the "invisible hand") entitles Milbank to describe the "evil" of the market economy as a theodicy. He writes:

Economic theodicy is conjoined with evangelicalism focused on a narrow, individualist practical reason which excludes the generous theoretical contemplation of God and the world . . . this strange conjuncture goes on providing a background legitimization for capitalism which long survives its specifically Malthusian form. Indeed, such a mean little heresy today increasingly defines `Christianity', and once again helps to shape Anglo Saxon social reality.<sup>39</sup>

Here we have Milbank's understanding of the foundation for sociologists' seemingly inexplicable conflict between needs and faith. When the economic theodicy of market economics excludes God's peaceful providence, there is no room for any human belief except in our self-interest. Is our security as members of the middle class slipping? Then we have only self-interest to resort to. And what of our relationship to the poor? If they can develop the same kind of "Malthusian" virtues of hard work and frugality as the middle class, they may become responsible for the improvement of their own conditions.<sup>40</sup> Disinterested as we are, benevolence from person to person may only be qualified by the poor's own efforts to better their own conditions!

Perhaps Robertson's assessment of Milbank is right. Is there no escaping, like St. Paul, from this "body of sin?" Will secularly informed sociology (however well done) rule the field by default? Milbank believes otherwise. Like the story of the "Emperor's New Clothes," he believes that he has shown that, "no such fundamental account, in the sense of something neutral, rational and universal, is really available." He goes on, "It is theology itself that will have to provide its own account of the final causes at work in human history, on the basis of its own particular, historically specific faith."<sup>41</sup> We do have hope and that hope is embodied in our historically conditioned history. And its vehicle is the church.

The church, however, has frequently failed on its own terms. It has failed to secure a "peace beyond the law" and "Yet . . . there is no going back; only Christian theology now offers a discourse able to position and overcome nihilism itself."<sup>42</sup>

The church has fallen short; but the problem is, there is no alternative. The church that has retreated from the embodiment of justice and peaceful providence to only the "cure of souls" is a church in trouble. Why? Because "a Church which understands itself as having a particular sphere of interest will mimic the procedures of political sovereignty, and invent a bureaucratic management of believers."<sup>43</sup> He adds elsewhere, "Such rule is a kind of mimicry of ecclesiastical peace, because it can be based upon a consensus, yet the basis of the consensus is not agreement about either 'the goal' or 'the way', but merely a deferral to 'expert' opinion. And expertise is only expertise about power."<sup>44</sup>

Milbank's description of the church's retreat from social criticism and economic participation feels like a bitter pill to swallow. No wonder his critics wonder aloud if he is full of "despair." And yet to read him only this way is to miss some very critical points, much like missing his reintroduction of sociology. For Milbank's description of the church at work as the church it is called to be by its own historical particularity waxes almost poetic:

Instead of a peace "achieved" through the abandonment of losers, the subordination of rivals and resistance to enemies, the Church provides a genuine peace by its memory of all the victims, its equal concern for all its citizens and its self-exposed offering of reconciliation to enemies. The peace within the city walls opposing the "chaos" without, is, in fact, no peace at all compared with a peace coterminous with all being whatsoever. Space is revolutionized: it can no longer be defended, and even the barbarians can only respect the sanctuary of the Basilica.<sup>45</sup>

Does this not sound like the sort of strong and vital Christian faith for which Wuthnow longs? Does this not sound like the faithful alternative to an oppressive and gradually decaying middle-class market economy? The picture is hardly one of despair. Perhaps what Milbank's critics are really wondering is: is this a picture of the "real world"? Can the world really be like this?

Hauerwas' appreciative essay on Milbank puts the finger on the problem: "Missing in Milbank, however is the concrete display of such forgiveness and reconciliation that makes God's peace present. What we need are stories, witnesses, like the one Rufus Bowman tells. . . of the Brethren . . . to the Indians in Morrison's Cove, Pennsylvania . ." <sup>46</sup> Indeed, in all the extraordinary rich complexity of Milbank's tour de force, never does he tell the kind of stories, historically contingent and particular by their very nature, that he lays claim to. The story Hauerwas refers to is of a community of "Dunkards," radical pacifists, who, when attacked by a band of Indians, rather than fight back, called on God's blessings. Without stories like these, apparently incommensurable with the violence of secular sociology's accounting, there are no concrete alternatives. Hauerwas goes on: "I think, finally, that such an example is what Milbank's book is all about. Without such examples Christianity makes no sense and there is no witness. It is when we lose the practices necessary to remember these people that the contingent witness that we must always make as Christians cannot help but be violent."<sup>47</sup>

Wuthnow's sociological tools have uncovered the extraordinary dependency of the American church on the middle class, a rapidly eroding middle class at that. His cry of alarm rightly draws our attention. But given his enmeshment in the sociology of competing spheres, can he find a way out? Do his tentatively suggested alternatives really ring true? The invention of the new narrative of the market economy is very powerful with its own internal logic. In fact, it is so powerful that it has a "new `classical' beauty . . . which consists in the inner consistency and `harmony' of the operations of utility."<sup>48</sup> To be sure, Wuthnow bristles against this kind of utilitarian calculation but without any recourse except to marginalized religious culture, what can he do? He can only hope that religion will be courageous enough, muscular enough by its own denominational confessional traditions, to compete against this calculated utility. Of course, given the over-arching power of market economics and sovereign politics, as Wuthnow conceives them, the best that can be hoped for is victory in small skirmishes.

Both Wuthnow and Milbank end up seeing the church as an alternative response (in Milbank's case, the only alternative) to the cruel dictatorship of economics and politics. Milbank may manage to unseat the hegemony of this new secular sociology that requires its own faith, but does he let in another cruel dictatorship? By his own admission, the church has often fallen short. Hauerwas points out how important real, concrete stories are to Milbank's case. Only when he can tell such stories can he lay claim to the sort of peaceful kingdom he reads in theology's contingent history.

Those narratives, personal and profound, real and important, are just what Wuthnow provides. He can offer Milbank the narrative strength and perhaps the refined speculative tools of a Christian sociology. In turn, Milbank offers Wuthnow what Wuthnow may not be able to find on his own—a real and profound alternative to the fictive but nevertheless, powerful hegemony of economic sovereignty.

Milbank rightly contends that sociology must be let back into the conversation, not as a secular theory but as method of speculation. At the same time, Christian social theory depends on Wuthnow's concrete encounters with real-world narratives. Those insights invite us to imitate the disciples and the saints who have gone before us.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Wuthnow, *The Crisis in the Churches: Spiritual Malaise, Fiscal Woe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), v.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>Philosophical Remarks, ed. R. Rhees (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975) III, 25. Quoted by Judith Genova, *Wittgenstein, A Way of Seeing* (New York: Routledge, 1995), xiv.

5Wuthnow, *Crisis in the Church*, 238-9.

6Robert Wuthnow, "What Religious People Think about the Poor," *The Christian Century*, 111 (September 7-14, 1994), 812.

7 Wuthnow, *Crisis in the Church*, x.

8 *Ibid.*, 241.

9 *Ibid.*, 127.

10 *Ibid.*, 221.

"Wuthnow, "What Religious People Think about the Poor," 816. 12Wuthnow, *Crisis in the Church*, 12.

'3*Ibid.*, vii. '4*Ibid.*, 79-80. '15*Ibid.*, 183. '6*Ibid.*, 23.

"*Ibid.*, vi-vii.

'18Interview with Robert Wuthnow, Alban Institute, "AI Interviews Robert Wuthnow, Economic Disparities: Telling Stories," *Congregations, The Alban Journal* 23 (MarchApril, 1997).

'9Wuthnow, *Crisis in the Church*, 88.

20*Ibid.*, viii. 2'*Ibid.*, 5.

22Roberts, "Transcendental Sociology?"

23stanley Hauerwas, *Wilderness Wanderings* (Boulder: Westview, 1997), 194.

24John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 2.

25*Ibid.*, 10.

26 Ibid., 5.

27 Ibid., 5.

28 Ibid., 1.

29 Ibid., 191.

30 Ibid., 108

31 Ibid., 109.

32 Hauerwas, *Wilderness Wanderings*, 194.

33 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 388.

34 Ibid., 117.

35 Ibid., 139. 36 Ibid., 140. 37 Ibid., 14. 38 Ibid., 31.

39 Ibid., 45. 40 Ibid., 44. 41 Ibid., 380.

42 Ibid., 6.

43 Ibid., 408.

44 Ibid., 433.

45 Ibid., 392.

46 Hauerwas, *Wilderness Wanderings*, 195.

47 Ibid., 196.

48 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 380.

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'Richard Roberts, "Transcendental Sociology? A Critique of John Milbank's Theology and Social Theory beyond Secular Reason," *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 46 (1993), 535. Roberts writes, "We conclude that *Theology and Social Theory Beyond Secular Reason* is an extended and brilliant exercise in despair. Earlier, he wrote: "Dr. Milbank places both theology and sociology (as practiced in the real worlds) in ethical difficulties . . . to rule out such mixed commitments, a priori, as does Milbank, comes close to intellectual abuse. The ethical consequences are potentially disastrous" (534). Gerald Loughlin in a review of *Theology and Social Theory* (*Modern Theology* 8 [1992], 381), writes, "At the end of the story the hero has not overcome the opponent, but simply stands in front of him, face to face, fiction to fiction, story to story. Which story shall we tell in the future?"

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