

# ***RADICAL ORTHODOXY AND THE RELIGIONS OF OTHERS***

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**A**s a Christian theologian committed to “doing theology in conversation with Jews,”<sup>1</sup> Clark Williamson has long argued that Christians must take seriously the possibility (indeed, the reality) “that the covenant between the God of Israel and the Israel of God remains valid and that Jews find fulfillment in faithfulness to that covenant.” Beyond that, Williamson has supported the affirmation that the “Jews as Jews witness to the grace of God.”<sup>2</sup>

As it happens, the assertions cited above summarize not only views that Williamson himself affirms but also major points made in official church statements (both Protestant and Catholic) formulated in the post-Holocaust era.<sup>3</sup> That is not something one would likely have anticipated on the basis of previous church teachings. However true to certain fundamental theological principles, these affirmations mark a kind of revolution, having rarely been countenanced in the past by Christians who regarded themselves as orthodox in their theology.

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<sup>1</sup>The phrase occurs in Clark M. Williamson, *A Guest in the House of Israel: Post-Holocaust Church Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 9.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 28-30.

Moreover, this recent change in outlook is not confined to academia or to church elites and hierarchies. It seems safe to say that a significant number of Christians these days – though relatively few of those who label themselves “evangelical” – have rejected, both formally and informally (if nonetheless imperfectly), the anti-Jewish and exclusivist position that traditional Christian theology has so often endorsed or at least implied.

In thus setting aside an exclusivist and blatantly supersessionist theology, however, many Christians in our time have been inclined to substitute a pluralistic stance that, in effect, treats all religions as intrinsically and unquestionably equal, though separate. Williamson’s own theological position is not to be confused with this uncritical sort of pluralism, which leaves no room either for genuine religious difference or for the crucial prophetic judgment that some religious practices might in fact be unhealthy, idolatrous, and even false.<sup>4</sup>

It may not always be clear what Williamson wants Christians to do with various other religions, apart from Judaism (with which Christianity has special family ties). What is clear is that, in Williamson’s judgment, a post-*Shoah* Christian theology cannot afford (for all sorts of reasons) to treat Judaism itself as an enterprise that God, for the past two thousand years, has wanted to put out of business. Nor can Christian theology make good sense of its own core teachings regarding divine love, activity, and purpose and still remain narrowly exclusive in its teachings regarding religious truth or the scope of salvation.

It follows that, from the revolutionary or even radical Christian perspective that Williamson embraces, one pressing question to be asked of any new theological position is where it stands with respect to the religions of others (beginning, in principle, with the religion of the Jews). In the remainder of this essay I address that question to the recent Christian theological movement that calls itself “radical orthodoxy” – which simultaneously advertises itself as a “new theology.” In this necessarily brief inquiry I must content myself with observations regarding one influential book and a pair of

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<sup>4</sup>See Clark Williamson, *Way of Blessing, Way of Life: A Christian Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 67-70.

essays by the thinker most representative of radical orthodoxy. That should be enough, however, to uncover something seriously worrying about the implicit stance of radical orthodoxy toward the religions of others, including the religion of the Jews.

## **AN ORTHODOX DIVISION**

The approach to theology known as radical orthodoxy is for the most part a product of Anglican and Catholic theologians presently or previously associated with Cambridge University. Up to now the leading spokesperson for radical orthodoxy has undoubtedly been John Milbank, who several years ago relocated to the University of Virginia.

More than a decade ago, Milbank published the ambitious book *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, in which he attempted just what the title promised.<sup>5</sup> That is to say, in this book Milbank tries to show that secular reason, as seen chiefly in philosophy and the secular social sciences, is no more rationally justifiable than Christianity and, when judged from a Christian perspective, is dangerously defective and deficient. Indeed, Milbank argues that secular reason always turns incoherent and, in the end, nihilistic – entailing or inventing, despite itself, some kind of inadequate meta-narrative and quasi-religious metaphysic. Focusing on modern social science in particular, Milbank claims that such a science, far from evincing rational integrity and independence, turns out to be either a kind of Christian heresy or an insidious form of neo-paganism.

Not that Christian theology itself is to be regarded as a perfect revelation of propositions received from on high. Theology, as depicted here in Milbank's radical orthodoxy (before that phrase was coined), is admittedly socially constructed, like the rest of culture. Postmodernism has been right about that. The kind of truth that theology can claim is not, therefore, a truth of infallible propositions

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<sup>5</sup>John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

firmly grounded either in universal reason or in positive divine revelation. It is instead a truth that is narrative, aesthetic, and pragmatic – a truth to be explored, nonetheless, metaphysically and cosmologically, and to be understood as pertinent to everything that so much is. It is likewise truth to be enacted in non-violent social and political practice.<sup>6</sup>

In the absence of a coherent and non-violent secular alternative, Milbank argues that, despite Christianity’s tragic failure to sustain the peace it envisions, “only Christian theology now offers a discourse able to position and overcome nihilism itself.”<sup>7</sup> That is a bold and sweeping claim to make for any religion. But it is consistent with Milbank’s view that Christianity has been mistaken as it has increasingly conceded an ostensibly neutral space for secular truth – and even more mistaken when it has attempted (as in liberal and liberation theology) to build on social science instead of seeing how theology is called to be, itself, the ultimate social science.<sup>8</sup>

What may go almost unnoticed in all this attack on secular reason is that Milbank singles out only one religion as an alternative to the utter emptying of values that we call nihilism. On closer inspection, it appears that Milbank works with two assumptions when representing religion. First, when Milbank is thinking of religion in negative terms, he assumes that certain forms of non-Christian religion are essentially deficient mythology – sharing most, if not all, of the failings of secular reason (which he regards as not so rational after all). Second, when referring positively to religion, Milbank apparently assumes that, although at least one form of religion – namely, Judaism – may offer something worthwhile, Christianity provides the standard for religion generally, transcending and implicitly critiquing religion in every other guise.

Regarding the first assumption – that certain forms of non-Christian religion are no better off than secular reason – in *Theology and Social Theory*, “religion” in this negative sense usually refers to classical metaphysics, pagan religion, or modern neo-paganism

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<sup>6</sup>See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 6.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

(which Milbank regards as at least indirectly courting nihilism and violence). In the crucial chapter on “Founding the Supernatural,” for instance, Milbank makes it plain that, when a philosophy is imbued with Christian theology, it becomes inconsistent with certain forms of religion. Thus Milbank declares that, for the modern Catholic philosopher Maurice Blondel (with whom Milbank expresses a special affinity), every human action “is prophetic of Christ, or secretly refers to him.”<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that Blondel is a philosopher, he eventually affirms “not just supernatural grace, but also the incarnation, the need for atonement, and the Trinity.”<sup>10</sup> Believing that no viable philosophy can refrain from theology, Milbank clearly approves of Blondel’s explicitly Christian turn: “Reunderstood as theology, Blondel’s philosophy can mostly stand.”<sup>11</sup> Milbank also states, however, that such a philosophy is inconsistent with “some other religions” such as antique metaphysics and modern rationalism – the former having a hidden affinity with the neo-pagan “nihilism” of the latter.

As for the second assumption – that Christianity embodies whatever is viable and true in religion – Milbank, as far as I can determine, never goes quite so far as to state such a thing outright. Yet throughout *Theology and Social Theory*, “religion” in the positive sense is repeatedly assimilated to “Christianity.” We hear nothing of how there might be a way of justice, righteousness, and peace that could in some sense be narrated or practiced in Jewish ways. Judaism, instead of being attacked, is mostly ignored. It is as though Thomas Aquinas had composed his *summas* without ever having heard of Moses Maimonides, or as though medieval Christianity had rediscovered and absorbed Greek philosophy without the crucial aid and interpretive insights of both Muslims and Jews.

The problem, however, is not just that Milbank generally ignores Judaism, it is that Milbank is so insistent that *only* Christians can provide any sort of viable alternative to nihilism and violence. This latter point is reinforced when Milbank criticizes the contemporary French social theorist René Girard. What Milbank criticizes is

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<sup>9</sup>Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 216.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 217.

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

not Girard's unabashed privileging of Christianity and of the Jesus story at the expense of all other religions – religions that Girard regards (on an allegedly “scientific” basis) as all rooted in violence. Instead, what Milbank criticizes is Girard's positivist theory of religion and of its relation to social violence, which fails to perceive that our most basic desires in life might have an objective basis (God-given) rather than being engendered entirely by “mimetic rivalry.” Even more, Milbank criticizes Girard's failure to see or say clearly *why* Christianity is so special. Milbank wants Girard to notice how the specific form and narrative of Jesus' refusal of violence is what henceforth makes available an alternative practice – a non-violent Christian politics.<sup>12</sup>

Once Milbank has let us know that the exemplary narratives of Jesus are what show us the shape of a non-violent practice, Milbank is happy to “rescue,” as he puts it, Girard's argument for Jesus' “finality.”<sup>13</sup> In the process, Milbank appears to be willing to accept Girard's claim that the Bible “gradually exposes and rejects ‘the sacred’ as understood by all other cultures,” so that, in Milbank's paraphrase of Girard, “finally, in the New Testament, all violence, and all sacralization of violence, is totally eschewed. Jesus reveals that even Jewish law and society is founded upon exclusion and expulsion.”<sup>14</sup> Is this not another, and blatant, form of supersessionism? Is not Christianity here sharply divided from, and (as in older orthodoxy) set far above, every other form of religion?

## **MORE RADICAL, PLEASE, AND LESS ORTHODOX**

The approach exemplified in *Theology and Social Theory* is extended in the essays by diverse hands that, nearly a decade later, are published in the collection *Radical Orthodoxy*.<sup>15</sup> Milbank contributes

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<sup>12</sup>Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 395-396.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 396.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 393.

<sup>15</sup>John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999). See also John

to the introduction and provides the lead essay, in which it is hard to see any sign of mellowing or moderation. The introduction declares that, from the point of view of radical orthodoxy, humanism is dead: there is no autonomous discipline or science, no knowledge that is not in some way theologically positioned. The exclusive commitment to Christianity is, if anything, more conspicuous than ever. The introduction explains that “orthodoxy” here has to do, first of all, with a commitment to “creedal Christianity and the exemplarity of its patristic matrix”; second, it reflects the desire to affirm a “richer and more coherent Christianity” that was lost sight of after the late Middle Ages.<sup>16</sup> Even the term “radical” is said to relate to the need for Christian – particularly patristic and medieval – roots.

The radical element of this theology is also linked, however, to a sense of the participation of all things in a sacred, “infinite interpersonal [trinitarian?] harmonious order” that “suspends” everything temporal and thus upholds all that is.<sup>17</sup> Here a welcome difference from neo-Orthodoxy becomes apparent. One could say that, whereas for Karl Barth only God is sacred, for the radically orthodox everything is sacred when rightly discerned. Milbank’s lead essay will suggest, as the introduction promises, that “all real knowledge involves some revelation of the infinite in the finite.”<sup>18</sup> One could anticipate, on the basis of this “theology of participation,” some acknowledgement of different but related ways in which various religions come to know or reveal something of “the infinite.”

In fact we hear nothing of the kind. Tracing radical orthodoxy back to two insufficiently appreciated Lutheran “radical pietists” of the eighteenth century, Johann Georg Hamann and Franz Heinrich Jacobi, Milbank uses the latter to argue that – going beyond Luther’s principle of “justification by faith alone” – we have genuine

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Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

<sup>16</sup>Milbank et al., *Radical Orthodoxy*, 2.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 2, 3.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

knowledge by faith alone. To reason truly about anything at all, and in any degree, one must already be illumined by God.<sup>19</sup>

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

Instead of taking any such route, Milbank next uses the theories of Hamann to argue that our endeavor to know anything at all presents us with two choices, and *only* two. Confronted as we are with "an immense depth behind things," we can either look with eyes devoid of faith and grow desperately dizzy from incomprehension or sheer superficiality, or we can trust the depth and take surface appearances and history as the "gift of depth," a gift restored in Christ. Why Christ? With Christian insight, "we can see easily the secret identity of all impersonal religions which celebrate fate or the void with the nihilism of modernity." That being the case, "It is indeed for radical orthodoxy an either/or: philosophy (Western or Eastern) as a purely autonomous discipline, or theology: Herod or the magi, Pilate or the God-man."<sup>20</sup>

In this stunning play of either/or, Milbank in effect excludes the possibility that there could be any non-Christian religious narrative or ontology capable of responding at all faithfully to "depth" or of overcoming the nihilism that Milbank attributes to philosophy (Eastern or Western). It all comes down to a choice between two sides: philosophy, Herod, and Pilate versus theology, the magi, and the "God-man." And this choice supposedly confronts us, in some sense, in the very act of trying to know anything at all! Tertullian's opposition between Athens and Jerusalem seems mild by comparison.

Had Milbank been working with a literalist approach to Christian scriptures and with a dogmatic theology that assumed a

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<sup>19</sup>Milbank et al., *Radical Orthodoxy*, 23, 24.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 32.

revelation consisting in divinely disclosed “facts,” one might understand more easily his succumbing to the temptation of such arbitrary and sharp binary oppositions – oppositions that, in their highly selective construal of Christianity as the sole possessor of an ontology of peace, surely do violence to the religions (and philosophies) of others. As it is, Milbank claims a narrative, aesthetic, and pragmatic approach, however orthodox its premises. Accordingly, it should have been relatively easy for Milbank to envision how multiple narratives can have similar pragmatic consequences for peace-making, supporting comparably desirable (if different) alternatives to nihilism. He could easily have acknowledged how even the Christian narrative will inevitably play out very differently in different settings, and sometimes not altogether peacefully. In short, were he not driven by his prior orthodox ideology, Milbank would have every reason to adopt some sort of critical pluralism in which Christianity, however special, distinctive, or even in some sense “final,” could have religious allies of a sort: partners in the desire for, and discernment of, sacred harmonies. Milbank could then have acknowledged God’s resourcefulness in working with multiple stories and histories capable of speaking differently, but in dialogue, from the depths. But to acknowledge that would have required a less orthodox and still more radical theology – a theology more in keeping with that proposed by Clark Williamson.

