

Theology and Social Theory

Beyond Secular Reason

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Second Edition



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Preface to the Second Edition: Between Liberalism and Positivism

Theology and Social Theory was written in the middle of the Thatcherite era, out of the conviction that a theological vision alone could challenge the emerging hegemony of neo-liberalism. This did not mean, as some have suggested, that I sought to instrumentalize theology and religion. To the contrary, I sought to show why, for reasons quite exceeding the political, a Catholic Christian account of reality might be entertained as the most finally persuasive one. But then, for both theological and historico-philosophical reasons, I sought also to argue that only a new embracing of such an account could free us from our contemporary historical deadlock.

Our current global situation is different, and yet is in essential continuity with the circumstances in which this book was written. Today, neo-liberalism has further extended its sway, but has now begun to mutate into a new mode of political tyranny. (For this reason, in response to the banalities of certain of my politically liberal critics, I simply offer a reading of the current daily newspapers in my defence.)¹ In some ways this makes the essential unity of *Theology and Social Theory* more apparent. For, from the beginning to the end of the book, it is constantly suggested that there is a problematic relationship between the formal openness of liberalism which is designed to mitigate conflict on the one hand, and an arbitrariness of content on the other hand – a ‘positivism’ which always threatens to overwhelm even the peace of mere suspended hostility which is the best that the *civitas terrena* can ever manage. This positive content can be *either* ‘scientific’ as in the case of eugenicism and the extermination of the supposedly weak (which happens in far more modes than we usually acknowledge) *or* it can be ‘religious’ as in the case of recently

¹ See, in particular, Christopher J. Insole, *The Politics of Human Frailty: A Theological Defence of Political Liberalism* (London: SCM, 2004). For a more elaborated version of my critique of political liberalism, see John Milbank, ‘The gift of ruling: secularisation and political authority’, in *New Blackfriars*, vol. 85, no. 996, March 2004, pp. 212–39. This article includes a discussion of Pierre Manent, whose thesis that liberalism assumes the priority of evil is very akin to my thesis about a theoretical assumption of ontological violence. Neither thesis is given any serious consideration by Insole, who falsely presents Hooker as a ‘liberal’ and judiciously favours those liberals like Burke, Tocqueville and Acton who embraced a more than considerable measure of criticism of liberalism as such (which gives rise of course to the question of whether a still merely partial critique did not leave them with irresolvable quandaries).

emergent 'fundamentalisms' which usually trade off, and theologically confirm, socio-economic liberalism, while also in certain strategic ways surpassing and opposing it.

In many ways the first two treatises of the book on 'liberalism' and 'positivism' respectively, are in consequence the most decisive – because 'dialectics' is seen as but a variant on liberalism in terms of a Christian Gnosticism (a thesis now amply confirmed by the work of Cyril O'Regan)² and 'difference' is seen as essentially a radicalization of the positivist vision. (Here the reader needs to be attentive to the fact that I treat 'positivism' in its historical complexity and ambiguity and never mean the term anachronistically – except where appropriate – in the mere sense of scientific or 'logical' positivism.)

These observations accord, I think, with the changed responses that the book is now liable to invoke. At first, there was a certain amount of outraged protest from sociologists, many of whom took it that I was objecting to a supposed 'reduction' of religion to the social, when I was explicitly arguing that 'the social' of sociology was itself an unreal, unhistorical and quasi-theological category.³ Today, this sort of reaction survives only amongst theologians themselves – who are still so often belated. Within secular social theory by contrast, there is a widespread recognition (only a very little indebted to the impact of my book) that 'sociology' is an exploded paradigm, and in part because of its inbuilt secular bias.⁴ The less ideologically-freighted models of ethnography and *histoire totale* are today far more in vogue – in academic practice still more than in academic theory.

There was some protest also from those still committed to the dialectical tradition.⁵ Overwhelmingly though, most thinkers of the left have now abandoned the Marxist affirmations of a teleological progressivism or any notion that there must come a necessary 'final' crisis of capitalism. Much more persistent remains the influence of Hegel's philosophy of history. Yet this is increasingly because interpreters confirm the essence of Alexander Kojève's reading of Hegel: the Hegelian metanarrative is plausible because it was *already* akin to a nihilist genealogy and was a kind of anti-metanarrative. For what it traced was the work of negation and redoubled negation in the sense of the dismantling of all bounds against a radically self-grounded freedom. In this sense the story told is of the gradual unleashing of the anarchically positive – even though it took Schelling to be clearer about this,

² See, amongst many works on this theme, in particular, Cyril O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (New York: SUNY, 1994).

³ See, for example, Kieran Flanagan, 'Sublime policing: sociology and Milbank's city of God', in *New Blackfriars*, vol. 73, no. 861, June 1992, special issue on *Theology and Social Theory*, pp. 333–41.

⁴ One could mention here Scott Lash, Neil Turnbull and the circle of leading British social theorists focused round the journal *Theory, Culture and Society* which is edited from Nottingham Trent University.

⁵ See Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of our Ancient Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) p. 279ff.

and Hegel himself commendably, but inconsistently, had aspirations to resist such a rule of both the formal and the arbitrary. It is also true that the thesis of an 'end of history', when there emerges a full mutual recognition of autonomy, fails to see that the celebration primarily of freedom has no stable way of securing the value of such mutual recognition over-against the positive affirmation of one particular freedom or set of freedoms as paramount. In consequence it has no surety against history resuming its sinister inventiveness.

Still more markedly, there was a great deal of protest from those influenced by the 'left-Nietzscheanism' stemming from the 1960s, an influence in which *Theology and Social Theory* is itself clearly steeped. This protest almost always took the form of saying that I was wrong to see this discourse as upholding nihilism and 'ontological violence' – rather it supported the diversity of life and held open infinite possibilities of variegated coexistence with others fully acknowledged in their otherness.⁶ In retrospect though, one can see yet more strongly how the left-Nietzschean current constantly had to compromise a radical positivism which seeks actively to affirm the ungrounded 'mythical' content of difference beyond mere formal tolerance, with a continued attempt to re-inscribe some mode of stoic or Kantian formal resignation and collective agreement as to abstract procedures. This is as true in the end of Deleuze as it is more evidently true of Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard and even Badiou. These thinkers, therefore, were trapped in the liberal/positivist oscillation.

In this respect it is important to notice that *Theology and Social Theory* more than once suggests that the *soixante-huitarde* thinkers in fact tend to tone down both the critical rigour and the amorality of Nietzsche and Heidegger. The attempt to bend their diagnoses of the historical sway of arbitrary power to the cause of 'emancipation' was never truly plausible. Moreover, recent research on Nietzsche shows that his entire project *was*, after all, a politically extreme right-wing one (even though not, anachronistically, a 'Nazi' one, nor even in every respect proto-Nazi). His slaves were real not allegorical slaves, his men of power real, wanton, lightly-cruel aristocrats, supposedly the most beloved of women.⁷ The crude Nietzsche was also the true one – and yet it was the genuinely critical one, following through on the implications of a realization that 'God' and 'the Good' are but human inventions.

⁶ See Romand Coles, 'Storyed others and the possibility of *caritas*: Milbank and neo-Nietzschean ethics', in *Modern Theology*, vol. 8, no. 4, October 1992, special issue on *Theology and Social Theory*, pp. 331–53. See also, Eve Tabor Bannet, 'Beyond secular theory', Daniel Boyarin, 'A broken olive branch', Shiela Kappler, 'Quid faciemus viri, frater?' and Alan Shandro, 'Politics of postmodern theology', all in 'Symposium: John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*', in *Arachne*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1995, pp. 105–45. In addition see Gavin Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

⁷ See the cited nostrum from *Zarathustra* at the beginning of the Third Treatise of the *Genealogy*: Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. M. Clark and A. J. Swensen (Indianapolis, Ind: Hackett, 1998) p. 67. For the exposure of the fallacies of the French 'new Nietzsche' see Domenico Losurdo, *Nietzsche, il ribello aristocratico: biografico intellettuale e bilancio critico* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002); Jan Rehmman, *Postmoderner Links-Nietzscheanismus; Deleuze und Foucault; eine Dekonstruktion* (Hamburg: Argument Verlag, 2004).

Our problem today then, compared with fifteen years ago, is that we are now far more honestly aware that the most incisive thinkers of modernity have belonged to the political right and that some of them were at least semi-complicit with Nazism: Joseph de Maistre (increasingly invoked, even by the critical left), Auguste Comte, Donoso Cortes, Carl Schmitt, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, even Leo Strauss. For it is these thinkers who have tended most squarely to confront the problematic implication of liberalism with positivism that I have already referred to. Indeed one might very well argue that the most serious essence of the 'postmodern' is best captured by Comte's idea of an inevitable lapse of the 'metaphysical' liberal era of universal laws and abstractions towards the 'positive' era of diverse given facts, reworked myths and rituals and novel or renewed papacies.

It is for this reason that a new and more honest recognition of the far-right character of Nietzsche's politics (as of Heidegger's) does not tend to entail a loss of interest in his thought even on the part of the critical left. To the contrary, this interest rather now takes an altered form: first of all it is noted that Nietzsche is often pushing liberal theses to their logical conclusions in order to subvert them, and also that, in his bitter opposition to socialism (the ultimate real target of his hostility), Nietzsche was driven to conclude that socialism was grounded in the deepest Western legacy of Platonism and Christianity.⁸ Most recent thinkers on the left (Badiou, Žižek, Negri amongst others) seem to concur that Nietzsche was right in this realization and that Marx failed fully to realize its importance.

This recent, anti-revisionary attitude towards Nietzsche tends, I think, to make the final treatise of my book on 'difference' now more comprehensible. First of all, the most radical thinker of difference never pretended anything other than that it was grounded in an 'ontology of violence'. Secondly, he directed his philosophy first against socialism and as a consequence against Christianity. This lends a certain crude obviousness to my counter-strategy: defend Christianity and thereby supply again a new ontological and eschatological basis for socialist hope. At the same time though, there is clearly a complication – I appear to embrace certain aspects of the Nietzschean approach: namely the method of genealogy and a version of an ontology of difference.

Here I need to make some more general observations. The careful reader will realize that throughout the book the attitude towards 'secular reason' is never as negative as it appears to be on the surface. For it is viewed not as what it primarily proclaims itself to be, namely the secular, but rather as disguised heterodoxy of various stripes, as a revived paganism and as a religious nihilism. In each case my attitude cannot be simply oppositional, since I regard Catholic Christianity as fulfilling the best pagan impulses, heresy as exaggeration or thinning-down of the truth, and nihilism as a parody both of the Christian view that we are created from nothing and

⁸ Losurdo, *Nietzsche, il ribello aristocratico*.

that therefore all that is finite is indeterminate, and equally of the likewise Christian view that ordered beauty is paradoxically in-finite. It follows that there remains truth in all these distortions and even that, just as Irenaeus learned much from Valentinus, the distortions develop better certain aspects of orthodoxy which orthodoxy must then later recoup.

Thus despite the fact that I oppose a Catholic ontology to liberalism, positivism, dialectics and nihilism, my attempt to 're-imagine' Christianity in the present (an unfortunately increased imperative for today's theologian, given Christianity's long-term problematic decline and the almost ideologically opposite contemporary forms that it assumes) is newly marked by each one of these four currents. In the case of liberalism, I clearly do affirm some continuing but ideally receding need for a merely 'contractual' peace, as opposed to the real peace of consensus and gift-exchange.⁹ Moreover, I present stoicism as proto-liberalism and emphasize that a Christian approach to ethics and society (as can be seen with St Paul) does, indeed, owe something to stoicism. I do not simply line up Christianity with Platonic-Aristotelian virtue and eudemonism, but rather suggest that it offers a kind of *post-liberal* approach stressing ecstatic relationality and gratuity that is at a certain distance both from the cultivation of personal excellence and from 'stoic-modern' other-regarding duty.¹⁰ To a degree, following MacIntyre, I see Plato as having anticipated such a 'post-liberal' perspective in reaction to the sophists.

In the case of 'positivism' I intimate that it is a post-Christian phenomenon which contains many elements of distorted Christianity. These are: an identification of the Good with being, power and positivity; a search for a 'harmonic' non-agonistic social order; an elevation of the particular beyond the general; a realization that reason begins in collective devotion and can never really leave it behind; (sometimes) a non-nominalistic recognition that there are surd 'general facts' and irreducible relations and a refusal to pretend that we can see with certainty beyond the givenness of appearances. (Via Brentano, phenomenology is a child of positivism.) Insofar as these traits are found within the sociological tradition, then I clearly learn from it. Purged of the secular metaphysics which I disinter, sociology has contributed to the writing of history an indispensable insistence upon the synchronic and the geographical and to social ethics a refusal of a merely contractualist notion of the ideal society.

In the case of 'dialectics' I acknowledge in Hegel a correct post-Renaissance attempt to integrate theology and philosophy around an account of history and the creative development of the human spirit: indeed, *Theology and Social Theory* is a kind of initial attempt to re-do Hegel in a non-gnostic fashion that

⁹ This seems to be completely lost on Insole whose ascription to me of a kind of blithe wilful Maytime optimism entirely ignores my Pauline insistence on the utter fallenness and demonic captivity of the current world. Only with strenuous difficulty, only indeed as a form of Christian *gnosis* – which Paul yet dared to proclaim in the public forum – are we able to discern the hidden realm of real peaceful being that cosmic evil obscures from our view.

¹⁰ There is some resemblance here between my position and that of Robert Spaemann in *Happiness and Benevolence*, trans. Jeremiah Alberg, SJ (Notre Dame, Ind: Notre Dame UP, 2000).

refuses a Hegelian transparency of reason and identification of Creation with Fall. And although I argue that the ultimate logic of history is not dialectical and that dialectical processes are never entirely necessitated, I acknowledge that certain historical developments can be understood in dialectical terms – such that aspects of my own metanarrative are, indeed, as Rowan Williams pointed out, transparently dialectical.¹¹

Finally, to return to the question of ‘difference’, I embrace its accentuation of positivism which dispenses with much of the nominalist, rationalist and ahistorical residue in the latter: what is ‘positive’, is now the various unfounded regimes and fictions of power. But I suggest that only Catholic Christianity can be completely ‘positivist’, since it understands all evil and violence in their negativity to be privation. This opens the possibility of *the most radical imaginable modern pluralism*: namely that positive differences, insofar as they are all instances of the Good (a condition which of course will never be perfectly fulfilled in fallen time), must for that reason analogically concur in a fashion that exceeds mere liberal agreement to disagree. If that is the case, then a counter-genealogy to that of Nietzsche (such as already envisaged by Augustine and Vico) becomes feasible: one narrates not simply the military tale of the devices and victories of arbitrary power, but also the continuous and sometimes decisive interruption of this story by instances of the reflecting of perfect infinite peaceful power which is the Good in finite acts of goodness and their necessary compossibility.

But how to choose between these two alternative genealogical strategies? My book seemed to suggest that there are no grounds for such a choice. But in that case, as Gavin Hyman and others have astutely pointed out, is there not a meta-discourse of anarchic and so nihilistic non-reason that lies beyond even my metanarrative of the two cities and my ontology of peaceful difference? They are right to demand clarification.¹²

This would take two forms. First of all, from the point of view of my ontology, the ‘choice’ for peaceful analogy and the Augustinian metanarrative is *not* really an ungrounded decision, but a ‘seeing’ by a truly-desiring reason of the truly desirable. The second form of clarification, however, offers a certain limited mode of apologetic (a mode which I have never refused). Just as I can appeal to a certain inchoate current human preference for peace over violence that is both innate (from my metaphysical point of view) and a post-Christian residue, so also I can appeal to a certain bias towards reason rather than unreason (present for similar reasons). This is because the nihilistic vision concludes – from a cold reason that disallows to the ‘moods’ of eros, anxiety, boredom, trust, poetic response, faith, hope, charity and so forth an ontologically disclosive status – that, in the end, there is an incomprehensible springing of all from nothing and that further-

¹¹ Rowan Williams, ‘Saving time: thoughts on practice, patience and vision’, in *New Blackfriars* special issue, pp. 319–26.

¹² Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology*.

more the real ultimate nothing only 'is' through the unwarranted diversity of the all, which in turn constantly reveals its own secondary and illusory character as a papering-over of the void. Nihilism has then to take the form of a mystical monism. And the same is true of nihilism as a univocal ontology of difference: difference here, as 'original', must spring from a continuous auto-differentiation, in which, just *because* the One is never its unified self, it is *all the more dominant* even in its fated lapse. It is possible to read this metaphysics as the completion of Hegel's gnostic dialectics just as, inversely, it is possible to read Hegel's metaphysics as already a nihilism (as he himself sometimes describes it) in which final identity is only actual (as Slavoj Žižek has pointed out) as the infinite production of an *unmediated* residue of meaningless difference.¹³

But however it is presented, nihilism is the conclusion of 'pure reason' (reason in the mood of cold regard), not just to the void or to ontological violence, but also to the ontological reign of non-sense or unreason. This indeed was Nietzsche's central tragic crux: fully honest Western reason realizes that reason itself is but a pathetic human projection.

So, by contrast, it becomes possible to argue that a Catholic perspective saves not just the human bias towards peace and order, but also the human bias towards reason. Reason, for Catholic tradition, 'goes all the way down' – it is consistent with the infinite and it leaves behind no residue of chaos. For this reason a full 'rationalism' is linked with a Biblical *mythos* alone. It then follows that to 'choose' the Augustinian metanarrative and an Augustinian ontology of peace is also to 'elect reason', to fulfil the ineradicable bias of the human mind towards meaning (which *might* be just an accident of our animality) in the sense that this choice alone allows one to say that reason is ontologically ultimate – that there is, indeed, a final reason for things, a reason for being as such. And yet, to save the appearances of reason in this fashion requires the supplementation of reason by true desire and by faith – including the desire for and faith in, infinite reason. By contrast, to remain with reason alone turns out to mean (as Nietzsche correctly saw) the election of unreason. Apologetically one can suggest that in some profound sense to elect unreason is irrational... And yet if one does make this election, there is no neutral, uninflected reason that can gainsay such a fatal preference.¹⁴

I hope that the above detour helps to clarify my embracing of genealogy against Nietzsche himself. In a similar fashion, my relationship to the Nietzschean celebration of power is a complex one. On the one hand I am pitting a Dostoyevskyan notion of strength in weakness against this celebration (a theoretical tussle that was best expressed in dramatic form by John Cowper Powys in his great novel *Wolf Solent*). Since we are created, we are received, even as ourselves, before ourselves. Likewise, in order to exercise strength we

¹³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) pp. 201–33.

¹⁴ For a much more extended version of arguments about reason and mood, see my response to the *Arachne* symposium, 'On theological transgression', *Arachne*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1995, Symposium, pp. 145–76.

must first be sensitive and attentive, which always involves a vulnerable exposure to risk, failure and the tragic misinterpretation by others of our own ventures (as Rowan Williams has so repeatedly stressed in his theology). Negation is not inevitable, yet it is always going to be involved in a fallen Creation. And this situation reveals that power itself has a precondition in relational receptiveness which can indeed mean, as the Bible teaches, that it is the 'weak' who will turn out to be strong, for mostly unNietzschean reasons.

On the other hand, just because receptivity is for us ontologically primordial, it cannot begin as a passivity in the ordinary sense: as I am *entirely* received, even as an I, there is no original 'I' that could be the subject of a passivity. Reception is therefore from the outset active and affirmative and this ontological circumstance is reflected ontically in our best attention towards others. Since we cannot be in their position save by falsely feigning an absolute sympathy which secretly seeks to displace them, our true attention weaves further the interval of a 'between', such that we most accurately sympathize by creatively responding with our own perspective. In this way the work of solidarity in its essence promotes, in their shared compossibility, both the power of others and our own. This Spinozistic and Leibnizian – ultimately Scotist-derived – perspective (which nonetheless I believe requires the ontological ground of Creation *ex nihilo*, and Thomistic real relationality together with a created primacy of analogy) points more in the direction of an agreement with the Nietzschean affirmation of power – a side of my position developed further in writings since *Theology and Social Theory*.¹⁵ For if, as for Catholic truth, the Good is entirely positive, then power as power is indeed the Good itself in its original inexhaustible plenitude: insofar as it is evil, it is weakness in a final, ontological sense of false unnecessary limitation, rather than the sense of receptivity, or suffering of evil undergone in order to overcome it. (In a fallen world this suffering of limits, and sacrificial foregoing in the face of evil scarcity, is indeed our only way to reinvoked true joy and original peace and plenitude. Nevertheless, I tend to insist on the ambivalence of suffering and the ever-lurking danger for Christianity of preferring suffering to cure: to give and to suffer for others 'charitably' means, as St Paul intimates, not simply to meet a need, but in meeting this need to re-invoke and restore a hedonistic gratuity and mutuality prior to all need.)

Because he conceived of a new sort of 'giving' virtue that acted non-reactively out of the plenitude of power, St Paul, as Alain Badiou has pointed out, was already more Nietzschean than Nietzsche.¹⁶ He refused the idea that goodness begins in a weak 'resistance' to evil (this is why, for him, *nomos* cannot redeem), whereas Nietzsche failed to see that even the affirmation of the strong over the hordes of the weak was a mode of 'weak' resistance to weakness. St Paul also realized that a true metaphysics of power must entail a

¹⁵ See, in particular, 'Can morality be Christian?', in John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 219–33. I am indebted to past discussions with Regina Schwartz on plenitude and scarcity.

¹⁶ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: la fondation de l'universalisme* (Paris: PUF, 1997).

primacy of *unthreatened* peace, and of the collective over the individual, since only a reciprocal 'weak' receptivity will build a real, shared strength.

The relation of the book to Nietzsche and his developers is therefore pivotal, not so much because they represent something altogether new and 'postmodern', as rather because the three post-Christian strands of liberalism, positivism and dialectics are here brought to a decisive head (including the inevitable residue of double negation that is the persistence of dialectics within nihilism) and pitted against Christianity itself, as well as its modern child, socialism.

The latter is read by me as, in its best mode, legitimately seeking further to realize latent dimensions in the medieval Christian tradition, yet in an idiom free of the dominant modern philosophy rooted in univocity, representation, soul/body dualism, ontotheology, univocal partitioning between divine and created causality and transcendentalism. The latencies concern the proper place of the laity, of the collective, of labour, of sexuality, of the arts, of language, of the material realm and of history. I would now see (following the historical insights of the Christian socialists Sergius Bulgakov and Stanislas Breton)¹⁷ the beginnings of traces with such concerns not just in Augustine, but also in the pagan neo-Platonist Proclus, whereas I would now regard Plotinus, via Avicenna (whose influence then runs through Scotus, Henry of Ghent etc. and so ultimately to Kant), as the ultimate grandfather of the 'main report' of modernity.¹⁸ Thus to my mind 'an alternative modernity' (which is much *more* modern than the essentially frightened Cartesian/Kantian dogmatic and domineering defence of the inner subjective citadel against historicist scepticism) would develop the theurgic side of neo-Platonism Christianized by Dionysius and Maximus.¹⁹ This side was more attentive to time, matter, artistic making and ritual rather than to an 'inward' turn that was ultimately born from Plotinus's relative abandonment of Platonic recollection of the Forms, which requires temporal 'triggers', in favour of a retreat to always latent psychic understanding. This retreat was linked to his non-Platonic supposition that there is a dimension of the human soul that is 'undescended' into time and space.²⁰ (For all Augustine's talk of a turning within, I see him as having made parallel moves in his doctrine of illumination to those of Proclus in relation to Plotinus, not as essentially Plotinian.)²¹ A version of Thomism and aspects of Pico della Mirandola and Nicholas of

¹⁷ See Sergius Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household*, trans. Catherine Evtuhov (New Haven, Conn: Yale UP, 2000) and Stanislas Breton, *The Word and the Cross*, trans. Jacquelyn Porter (New York: Fordham UP, 2002) esp. 'Translator's introduction', pp. vii–xvii.

¹⁸ See Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁹ See for example Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park, Penn: Penn State UP, 1995) and Ysabel de Andia, *Henosis: L'Union à Dieu chez Denys l'Aréopagite* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

²⁰ See Jean Trouillard, *La Mystagogie de Proclus* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1982).

²¹ For a summary and fine extension of this sort of interpretation, see Michael Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2003).

Cusa's blending of Dominican and more emphatically theurgic (including Hermetic and Cabbalistic) perspectives can be newly harvested within this *schema*.²² Indeed, it is tempting (though of course vastly over-simplifying in relation to the inwardly diverse theological inclinations of the religious orders) to describe our actual, 'Plotinian' intellectual modernity as also 'Franciscan', and the shadow, 'Proclean' modernity as also 'Dominican' (if one insists that Dominican neo-scholasticism was essentially contaminated with Scotism).

This contrast also permits me an improved genealogy for my consistent distinguishing of a modern-yet-conservative 'internal' and 'idealist' constructivism – of appearances by thought – from a 'shadow-modern' yet more radical external and more 'realist' constructivism – of culture and to a degree nature by the human psychic-corporeal unity. The former is 'Plotinian', the latter 'Proclean' in their ultimate derivation, even though the contrast between these two thinkers is in reality far more complex than this would indicate.

The understanding that socialism must be grounded in a Platonic, theurgic and Christian vision (one can also think of Thomas More, Tommaso Campanella and Jan Amos Comenius in this regard) is increasingly shared by the secular left – this was already intimated by the late Gillian Rose in her final phase, and more recently it has been emphasized, though in a problematic, atheist form, by Alain Badiou and, to a degree, Slavoj Žižek and Giorgio Agamben. In a certain fashion there is much more concurrence in tone between all these thinkers and the theses of *Theology and Social Theory* than is the case with those of the thinkers of transcendental difference. The latter, and especially their Christian *epigones*, tended to protest that postmodernity makes any notion of a 'metanarrative' impossible.²³ Much more perceptively, the theologian Gavin Hyman accepted my assertion that there is still a nihilist metanarrative (for example, the *Genealogy of Morals*) but then argued to an *aporia*: there has to be/cannot be a single metanarrative.²⁴ The upshot of this is to suggest an endless competition between metanarratives. Yet this is unthinkable: it would of course be agonistic, and no proponent of a single metanarrative would really accept the validity of the others. There would, indeed, have to be a 'playful' (but the game is played with money and guns) wandering between these grand stories, implying once more that there is really one single nihilist metanarrative and ontology of violence.

²² Catherine Pickstock's 'liturgical consummation of philosophy' offers exactly the same innovative theurgic emphasis. See Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). See also Geoffrey Hill, *Scenes from Comus* (London: Penguin, 2005) p. 19: 'I say imagine them I mean create them –/ another remnant of alchemical twaddle/that ceases to be twaddle in some cases.'

²³ See the respondents cited in note 6 above. Important (though I think in the end unsuccessful) attempts to find some balance between my position and that of the French postmodernists are those of Graham Ward in 'John Milbank's *Divina Commedia*', in *New Blackfriars* special issue, pp. 311–19 and Gerard Loughlin, 'Christianity at the end of the story, or the return of the master narrative', in *Modern Theology* special issue, pp. 365–85.

²⁴ Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology*.

As against this, one can point out, first of all, that the Augustinian and the Nietzschean metanarratives are *not* entirely distinct. Their mirroring disagreement implies agreement about many, even most, of the facts, even if a disagreement of interpretation certainly involves some factual dispute also. Gavin Hyman's citations of passages where Nietzsche insists on the subjectivity of his viewpoint really apply more to the interpretation of the genealogy than the latter as such (more to Book 3 of the *Genealogy of Morals*).²⁵ And I would want to insist that my own version of an Augustinian metanarrative, while being a seamless weave of fact and interpretation, is still presented as a debatable account of actual real history – in relation to which one could urge facts, reasons, probabilities and persuasions both for and against. It is only a 'fiction' in the sense that it is a reflexive doubling of the 'lived fiction' (human makings; makings of humanity) which composes enacted history itself.²⁶

But the more recent ponderings of the secular left (as chiefly represented by Badiou, but also by Peter Hallward) suggest a general acceptance of the argument that the philosophy of difference grounds only a social *agon* and therefore is complicit with late capitalism.²⁷ Likewise its nihilism and immanentism is always at once both monistic and dualistic. For if difference is original and univocal, then it is the non-relational expressive *glissando* of a problematic transcendental *Unum* which engenders a series of necessary but bad failures-to-attain pure continuous variation (which would be impossible). It thereby gives rise to the universes of 'presence' and 'representation' over-against the good but unattainable or always postponed, since 'non-actual' world of absolute difference, pure gift, the wholly other or whatever.²⁸ This severe, even incipiently Manichean dualism can undergird a liberal politics of self-satisfied gesture, but not one that attempts to build a new form of just community around an accepted common good: such an enterprise requires instead, as Peter Hallward says, an ontology of relation and mediation, of *metaxu* (not really there in Hegel, as William Desmond has brilliantly argued) 'between' the one and the many.²⁹ Precisely a Platonic, neo-Platonic and Catholic 'analogical ontology', as my book contended. But the full argument

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 109. And see Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy*, Preface 8, pp. 6–7 and Third Treatise: What do Ascetic Ideals Mean?, pp. 67–111; *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974) sections 373–4, pp. 334–7.

²⁶ For a much more extended consideration of my historical method and notions of metanarrative and ontology, see John Milbank, 'The invocation of Clio', in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol. 33, no. 1, March 2005, pp. 3–45. This was in response to the summer 2004 special issue on my ethical thought with contributions by James Wetzel (Augustine) Gordon Michalson (Kant and modernity) Jennifer Herdt (charity and sympathy) and David Craig (Ruskin).

²⁷ See, especially, Peter Hallward, 'The one or the other: French philosophy today', in *Angelaki*, vol. 8, no. 2, August 2003, pp. 1–33.

²⁸ See Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, trans. Louise Burchill (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2000) and Catherine Pickstock, 'Quasi una Sonata: music, postmodernism and theology', in Jeremy Begbie (ed.), *Theology through Music* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006).

²⁹ William Desmond, *Being and the Between* (New York: SUNY, 1995); *Hegel's God: A Counterfeit Double?* (London: Ashgate, 2003).

for a genuinely theological and realist version of these claims and intimations lies ahead of us and cannot be made here.

It remains the case, nevertheless, that there is a new recognition of a need for a universal discourse if we are to sustain any political hope. At the same time, those who remain critical of liberalism have still absorbed Nietzsche's lesson that the urge towards universalism as such is contingently and historically rooted in Platonism, the Hebrew Bible and Christianity. It is this insight which prevents any sort of return simply to 'enlightenment' rational universality as if this had just been dangerously forgotten by the fancy footwork of the postmodernists. Instead, there is a newly serious post-secular, rather than neo-modern, investigation under way into the paradoxical specificity of the European commitment to the universal.³⁰

I hope that *Theology and Social Theory* can still make a contribution to this urgent task. However, critics have rightly demanded clarification of precisely what I mean by an analogical ontology of peace which is also an ontology of the participation of the Creation in divine creativity.

For it seems that here I face in two directions at once: towards a call for a return to the pre-modern prior to 1300 on the one hand, but towards an invocation of modern romantic expressivism and 'postmodern' ultra-constructivism on the other. It is perhaps mainly for this reason that reactions to my work have, in turn, tended to take two opposite forms. One reaction tends to see my own position as too 'positivist', while the other tends to see it as far too 'liberal'.

So on the one hand I am perceived as nostalgic, as appealing back to a static organic community and also as fideistic: as arbitrarily and violently asserting the hegemonic claims of one particular 'positive' cultural formation, namely Christianity, against the claims of all others. It is argued that I wish to subsume all philosophy within a positive theological discourse and that I favour politically a new theocratic order.³¹

On the other hand, I am perceived by other commentators as all too modern: as calling for an ultimate unleashing of all human expressive freedoms in terms of a dangerously utopian (still Rousseauian and Marxist) faith in their compossibility. In this case I am also perceived as far too rationalistic: as reducing the notion of revelation to an immanent historical and rational event, and as formally evacuating the concrete content of Christology and ecclesiology in a recognizably 'liberal' idiom.³²

³⁰ See also Remi Brague, *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilisation*, trans. Samuel Lester (South Bend Ind: St Augustine's Press, 2002).

³¹ See the essays by Bannet, Boyarin, Kappler and Shandro in the *Arachne* symposium. Also the contribution by Jennifer Herdt in the *Journal of Religious Ethics* special issue.

³² See Rusty Reno, 'The Radical Orthodoxy project', in *First Things*, 100 (2000) pp. 37–44 and Lewis Ayres (who is nonetheless generally very favourable towards my views) in his magisterial and fascinating *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2004) p. 403.

Sometimes it is suggested that I incoherently or else inevitably tend in both these directions at once. It should be said here that I regard the second 'liberal' charge as more subtle and plausible than the first 'positive' charge, even though I deny both of them. For while 'positively' I recommend Catholic Christianity as the one final and universal truth, I quite clearly envisage Catholicism in 'liberal' terms, if by 'liberal' one conotes the generous, open-ended and all-inclusive.

Nevertheless, both sets of critics are right to detect some haziness as to how the 'pre-modern' and the 'postmodern' elements in this book and my work in general belong together. There is no space here to give a fully satisfactory account of this, but I can at least offer some indicators.

First of all, in the wake of the *nouvelle théologie*, but still more strongly, I contend that there really were not two different discourses of philosophy and theology for the Church Fathers and that this was not a failure of conceptual clarification later cleared up in the Middle Ages. For Augustine it is not that 'faith seeks understanding', but rather that all knowledge, by faith, seeks wisdom.³³ He takes over the temporal dimension of knowledge that Platonism *already* recognized in the mode of the Meno problematic: how is it that we must search to find what we must in some sense already know, else we would not know to search for it in the first place? In Augustine's hands, the 'metahistorical' dimension of this metaphysics is accentuated: a far greater place is now given both to a mysterious protology and a mysterious eschatology. And because the question of an 'ontological forgetting' is now doubled by the affirmation of a contingent sinful forgetting that distorted finite being as such, the temporal dimension of understanding is newly projected onto an entire historical plane, with the Incarnation and birth of the *ecclesia* at its centre.

This means that, already in Augustine, theology is in some sense the third term that links the philosophical elaboration of a general ontology with the historical interpretation of particular events. Moreover, as J.-L. Chrétien has argued, Augustine was perhaps the first thinker decisively to suggest that human art was in some measure 'like' divine creation. Chrétien's very fine essay on this topic is in fact critical of Augustine's innovation, but his own contention that divine creation in the Bible is always a matter of 'speaking', and not artisanal 'making', does not seem to take account of numerous passages.³⁴ Likewise, Chrétien's view that assimilation of human art to creation downgrades an older Greek craft-like attention to the thing-to-be-made in favour of expression of the artistic subject, ignores the fact that in ancient Greece making tended to be envisaged as simply material approximation to a pre-given form (albeit not idiosyncratic subjectivity), while, by contrast, the Augustinian notion of *verbum* and *ars* involves a participation in the Paternal

³³ Here I am indebted to recent discussions with Ellen Charry who has independently arrived at similar conclusions and is developing her own detailed scholarly elaboration of them.

³⁴ Jean-Louis Chrétien, 'From God the artist to man the creator', in *Hand to Hand: Listening to the Work of Art*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (New York: Fordham, 2002) pp. 94–130. For an appreciation and critique of this essay and several others by Chrétien, see Catherine Pickstock, 'Platonism and phenomenology in the work of Jean-Louis Chrétien', in *Nunc*, Autumn 2005.

uttering of the *Logos* who, as the divine Son, is more than simply a formal blueprint.³⁵ Hence this entire conception tends to have the opposite implication to that claimed by Chrétien, in that it reduces the difference between ‘art’ as prior process on the one hand, and ‘art’ as product on the other. It thereby encourages *both* a new stress on the expressive originality of human art *and* an attention to a newness that can only result with the emergence of the product itself. In this perspective the relatively ‘expressive’ reworking of this theme by a romantic such as Joseph Joubert on the one hand, and a relatively ‘artisanal’ and objective reworking of it by a modernist such as David Jones on the other, can be seen as two variants within one now very ancient paradigm.³⁶

Thus on my reading, from Augustine – and also, in a different idiom, from the Christian Procleanism of Dionysius – there is inherited first an integration of philosophy and theology and secondly a latent and linked concern both with historicity and with human *poesis* (see my remarks on Dionysius in this book). Aquinas, again on my (to some controversial) reading, synthesizes Augustine with Dionysius as well as with Aristotle, and at the deepest level essentially sustains this integration, even though he bequeaths a certain conceptual apparatus, which, misread, later permit a drastically dualistic conception of the relation of faith to reason to emerge.³⁷

As to what happened after Aquinas, a classically conservative, anti-modern reading of the later Middle Ages was provided by Hans Urs von Balthasar.³⁸ Theology goes in two opposite directions, which are both, for Balthasar, distortions. The first direction is consummated by Duns Scotus: finite and infinite being are seen as equally and univocally ‘in being’ – hence *esse* threatens to become greater than God and God to be idolatrously reduced to the status of a partner with his Creation in causal processes (and there is indeed ample evidence that this second tendency is already under way in Scotus himself).³⁹ The second direction is supremely represented by Meister Eckhart: God is *identified* with *esse* such that the true being of the Creation and especially of created spirit is to be located only within the Trinity itself. A kind of acosmic pantheism thereby threatens, which is the counterpart to the more cosmic, Spinozistic pantheism threatened by Scotism. In the wake of Eckhart, Pico and Cusanus also come under Balthasar’s partial condemnation.

It now appears to me though, that Henri de Lubac did not clearly go along with this genealogy and that this accords with a tendency in his thought to hold a problematic balance, prior to beatitude, between the natural and the

³⁵ See J.-P. Vernant, ‘Remarques sur les formes et les limites de la pensée technique des Grecs’, in *Mythe et Pensée chez les Grecs*, vol. 2 (Paris: Maspero, 1978) pp. 44–64

³⁶ See *The Notebooks of Joseph Joubert: A Selection*, ed. and trans. by Paul Auster (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983).

³⁷ See John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2001).

³⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics V: The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, trans. O. Davies et al. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1991) B. 1: ‘The parting of the ways’, pp. 9–48.

³⁹ See Jacob Schmutz, ‘La doctrine médiévale des causes et la théologie de la nature pure (xiii^e–xvii^e siècles)’, in *Revue Thomiste*, Jan–June 2001, pp. 217–64.

supernatural, reason and faith, philosophy and theology, despite the fact that the first sets of terms enjoy for him no pure neo-scholastic autonomy. By contrast, Balthasar much more emphatically insisted upon the 'reason of faith' as such (likewise the aesthetics and ethics of faith), but given this more Barthian fideistic drift, he was also always more likely to allow a relatively more autonomous realm of reason. In retrospect, it seems to me that my own intentions are far more like those of de Lubac than they are like those of Balthasar.⁴⁰ Even though I see philosophy, in its very nature as philosophy, as only completed by theology, I also see the latter, short of the final intuition of God, as always inevitably blending its intuitions of the advents of presence with a philosophical and abstracting discursiveness (which a narrative mode already implicitly assumes), as well as an empirical appeal to lived history and geographical situatedness.

In keeping with this revised conception (but not alteration) of my stance, I do not altogether accept Balthasar's conservative account of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance – and this difference is implicitly present in my original book. But it is now clearer to me that this involves a certain *recognition* of the rational power of the arguments of Duns Scotus and later of the terminists.

This new acknowledgement can be briefly summed up:⁴¹

⁴⁰ For a much fuller account of this, see John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

⁴¹ See Catherine Pickstock, 'Modernity and scholasticism: a critique of recent invocations of univocity', in *Antonionum*, 77, pp. 3–56; another version: 'Duns Scotus: his historical and contemporary significance', in *Modern Theology*, October 2005. This article is a comprehensive reply to the critics of the 'Radical Orthodoxy' account of Scotus. See also for a much longer elaboration of some of the historic-philosophical points made in this preface, John Milbank, 'Vérité et identité: le telescope Thomiste', in *Revue Thomiste*, *Veritas* special issue, Jan–June 2004, pp. 318–52. In general the idea that there is 'a controversial RO, reading of Scotus' is a chimera. The new insistence that Scotus is perhaps the central figure (amongst many others including Avicenna, Gilbert Porreta, Abelard, Roger Bacon, Henry of Ghent, etc.) in the crucial shift within Western thought within which Kant is still located is not original to RO, but has been elaborated by L. Honnfelder, J.-F. Courtine, O. Boulnois, J.-L. Marion and J. Schmutz, amongst many others, ultimately in the wake of Etienne Gilson, whose views they have nonetheless heavily qualified. (See, in particular, L. Honnfelder, *Scientia Transcendens: Die Formale Bestimmung der Seiendheit et Realität in der Metaphysik der Mittelalters und der Neuzeit (Duns Scotus – Suarez – Wolff – Kant – Peirce)* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1990)). The real controversy concerns the assessment of this shift and, regrettably, this point has been obfuscated by certain critics in a way that seems tactically dubious. As regards the assessment, one needs to note the following: first, the more 'analytic' and 'Anglo-Saxon' historians of medieval thought naturally favour the Scotist shift because it establishes the ultimate presuppositions of analytic philosophy itself. Second, the more phenomenological historians of medieval thought tend to be ambivalent because of their residual Heideggereanism: attribution of the invention of 'onto-theology' to Scotus (or the Scotist moment) now sets the date for this much later than it was set by Heidegger himself and exculpates the grand tradition of Christian theology from this charge. However, a sense remains that onto-theology somehow *needed* by fate to emerge so that it could also be exceeded. (By implication the 'grand tradition' is confusingly seen as *not* entirely free of onto-theology or metaphysics in a bad sense.) This exceeding is seen as emerging already in Scotus himself, in his focus on love and the will. RO by comparison tends to see Scotus's primacy of will and love over intellect and truth as still *in keeping with* or as colluding with his new onto-theology founded on the univocity of being (for the reasons why, see the Pickstock and Milbank articles); hence it tends to prefer Eckhart's intellectualist radicalization of the grand tradition, and to defend the

- 1 Scotus implicitly and cogently asks how, if created being simply shares in Being, it can really, integrally be.
- 2 Scotus and Ockham rightly question whether analogy of attribution does not violate the principle of non-contradiction, since there *is* no third term between the univocal and the equivocal.⁴²
- 3 Ockham likewise tends to suggest that certain realist conceptions of universals and real relations tend to violate the principle of identity. (How can a particular form *as* this form – which might, for example, in the case of the form of a man, be white *or* black – also be, or be able to become, the same form as universal – which, as denoting nominally a *genus* like ‘humanity’, might be determined as *either* white or black? How, likewise, can a thing be by necessary relation also what it is not?)⁴³
- 4 According to Ockham, every supposed grasp of a universal has clearly been arrived at through a process of linguistic naming.
- 5 Since Being is now univocal, it becomes less clear than it was for Aquinas that *ens commune* can only be the effect of an infinite cause. Already Ockham suggests, following the implications of univocity of Being (and well before the ‘Renaissance’) that while creatures cannot cause totally, they can still bring about finite being as such, in collaboration with God, on the same ontological level. And although we have no *experience* of this, even a human productive action presupposing no pre-given substrate, cannot be logically ruled out.⁴⁴

Now I depart from Balthasar’s conservatism in contending that thinkers like Eckhart, Dietrich of Freibourg, Nicholas of Cusa and Pico della Mirandola, as well as, rather later, Pierre Bérulle and Ralph Cudworth, all in various ways defended the analogical-participatory world-view, but realized that Aquinas could not at every point simply be repeated, because the new Scotistic and terminist insights had to be responded to. (It has to be said here that whether these are intentional responses cannot always be shown; yet it seems striking that these thinkers seem to offer what are in effect responses.) In each case (to grossly summarize) their diverse responses tend to go as follows:

- (1) For Eckhart, to ensure that God is not trumped by *esse*, one must indeed face up more radically to the *aporias* of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*: if this doctrine insists that God is the plenitude of being and that all created being derives from God, then in some sense the ground of created being must be

idea that there can be a non onto-theological theological ‘ontology’ or ‘metaphysics’ (for want perhaps of better terms).

⁴² Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* I d.3 Q.2 a2. 26; I d.8 Q 3.121; *Collatio* 24.24. William of Ockham, *Quodlibetal Questions*, 4.12

⁴³ William of Ockham, *Quodlibetal Questions*, 5.11; 5.12; 6.9; 6.10; 6.12; 6.13; 6.14.

⁴⁴ William of Ockham, *Quodlibetal Questions*, 1.1; 2.1: 2.9; *Reportatio*, 2.6.

uncreated.⁴⁵ But on the other hand, Trinitarian doctrine suggests that God within himself includes the 'impossible' creative going beyond himself. Thus while Eckhart maintained the orthodox distinction between divine generation/procession (of Son and Spirit) and divine creation, he not only connected these two motions (as did Aquinas) but also (like Eriugena much earlier) problematized their distinction by validly arguing that they must also be in one aspect identical in order to be distinguished: God's creating, since he is omnipotent, can 'only' be in one aspect his going forth within himself and returning to himself in responding to this going forth, while our created derivation from God and returning to God can 'only' be, again because of this omnipotence, entirely one with the event of divine generation and procession. The latter then is in some eminent sense identical with the inexhaustible kenosis of the uncreated indefinite into the created definite in which it ceaselessly and indefinitely defines itself. (The God who freely creates *is* the God who is internally expressive. Yet he does not 'become' in creating, nor in the history of the Creation undergo a process of alienation and its overcoming in Hegelian fashion.)

Eckhart therefore claims that, while the relation of creature to Creator remains always analogical, that nonetheless the relation of the soul to God in its ground is univocal, since there is a horizontal 'univocity' between the persons of the Trinity who are equal in being (a univocity that nonetheless exceeds the terms of any conceivable finite 'unity' that is defined over-against diversity, and which also lies beyond any finitely univocal contrast of opposites) within whose dynamic the soul is ultimately included.

It might be possible to qualify Eckhart here by saying that the perfect likeness of Son to Father which nonetheless alone constitutes the Father as 'original' is a kind of 'absolute analogue' that exceeds the analogy/univocity contrast – yet his basic point is correct. Perhaps, also, a threatened acosmism opened up by Eckhart's perspective needs balancing by a sophiological sense that God is in his own 'feminine' dynamic essence 'more than God'. This does further justice to the *aporia* of creation *ex nihilo*, in an opposite but complementary direction to that which was primarily taken by the German Dominican – and salves the Scotist anxiety about the integral actuality of the created order, without lapsing into Scotist ontotheology. Such a sophiological approach is naturally linked with a stronger stress on Trinitarian theurgic descent of God to humans in the liturgical community, beginning with ancient Israel. Maximus the Confessor's idea that the infinite points back to the finite as well as vice versa already indicated such considerations.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ See Burkhard Mojsisch, *Meister Eckhart: Analogy, Univocity, Unity*, trans. Orrin F. Summerell (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: B.R. Grüner, 2001). This book represents the consummation of a new, much more precise reading of Eckhart. Nonetheless, one may wonder whether Mojsisch interprets Eckhart too much backwards through Fichte. See also, for the view that Eckhart is writing in opposition to Franciscan univocity, Alain de Libera, *Le Problème de l'être chez Maître Eckhart: Logique et Métaphysique de l'Analogie* (Geneva: Cahiers de la Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie, 1980).

⁴⁶ Maximus the Confessor, *Mystagogy*, chapter 2. The modern Russian tradition of sophiology has also fundamentally to do with the problematic that I am indicating here.

Eckhart therefore radicalized analogy (perhaps against Scotus) by insisting on the full implications of Aquinas's view that the primary term (here God) in an analogical comparison 'gives all' to the secondary terms, which are but problematic approximations – at once, and in the same respects of finite perfection, like and unlike the primary term, else one could sift such approximation between the univocal and the equivocal. But as we have just seen, this meant that he also newly insisted on a different sort of univocity (compared to that of Scotus) within the relational and productive (Trinitarian) co-ordinations of the infinite itself. As with Scotus, he now declares that being is primarily univocal even in its inner dispersal, but unlike Scotus he locates this in infinite actuality and not in the logical (and by extension for Scotus – in a new, formal and proto-transcendentalist sense – the ontological) basis of 'vertical' infinite/finite relations.

He then concludes that every being and especially every spiritual being is grounded in, is in a mysterious way ultimately identical-with, this infinitude as its 'image', and so is finally drawn into a univocal ambience (albeit one beyond the contrast of identity and difference in a way that one should regard as supra-analogical) – yet this conclusion is required in part precisely by the logic of analogy of attribution.

(2) Eckhart and then Cusa, with a sophistication that is only now being fully explored, daringly decided to save analogy by abandoning non-contradiction at the ultimate level of being, because they were able to demonstrate that this cannot possibly apply to the *aporias* generated by notions of the infinite and the indefinite and their relation to the finite and definite. (For example the divine indefinite for Eckhart both must be and cannot be definitely defined over against the finite definite: this reasoning expresses the principle of Eriugena and later Cusa's *non aliud*.)⁴⁷

(3) In a similar fashion, Cusa, especially through mathematical examples, tends to treat universals and real relations in a way that advertises their irreducibly paradoxical character.

(4) Eckhart and Cusa (followed by several Renaissance and Baroque thinkers, including the neo-scholastic John of St Thomas) develop further the Augustinian and Thomist view that all thinking is speaking, and Cusa newly emphasizes external modes of expression. This tends in the direction of countering the nominalist reduction of universals to names by showing that a grasp of particulars is *also* a matter of constructive naming.

(5) Nicholas of Cusa accepts in the wake of the terminists that human art is now a mode of creation and that the finite is a scene of real originality, but tries to see this in analogical and not univocalist terms as a participation of human artistic arriving at 'new things' in the solely divine act of absolute creative positing of being.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ See Mojsisch, *Meister Eckhart*, pp. 102–9.

⁴⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *Idiota de Mente*, chapters 1 and 2.

In terms of these five new shifts, one can notice something broader and still more decisive. In effect, the neo-Platonizing Dominicans (in whom there is a complex mix of my 'Plotinian' and 'Proclean' tendencies, seeds of both a Vico/Jacobi/Hamann/Coleridge type 'external' constructivism and an inner Fichtean constructivism)⁴⁹ and the orthodoxly Christian Renaissance thinkers are conceding that Aquinas relied too much upon abstract reason (even if there is a latent poetics in his thought).⁵⁰ This means that in strictly rationalist terms of graspable logic, his theology can indeed be called into question, in the ways envisaged by Scotus and Ockham. If analogy must instead be conceptually seen in the conceptually impossible terms of *coincidentia oppositorum*, then the expressible reality of this re-conceived analogy will in fact be the more consciously necessary deployment of metaphor. Likewise, if universals are constructed, but are not thereby to be regarded as mere human fictions, then fictioning as such must participate in the Paternal fictioning of the filial *ars*. The two human modes of linguistic fashioning – history and literature, in their complex inter-entanglement both as enacted and as recited history (and there is, furthermore, no historical act that is not also a new addition to historiography) – are now seen as essential to the disclosing of truth.

In this way the latent humanism of Augustine's thought is much more brought to the fore and it becomes far more evident that philosophy as well as theology cannot be prised apart from event and image. This tends to mean that – in sharp contradistinction to neo-scholasticism – philosophy and theology are yet more radically fused into one discourse. Thus for Eckhart, the Bible is the profoundest of all works of metaphysics (as his Biblical commentaries reveal) while, inversely, spiritual intelligence as such is orientated by grace.⁵¹ For both Eckhart and Cusa the Creation itself must be primarily a finite reflection of the divine intelligence, such that God creates primarily 'through' created/uncreated spirit (humans, angels – and, for some in this sort of tradition, the *anima mundi*) in keeping with the Biblical doctrine that

⁴⁹ For example, Dietrich of Freibourg rejected Aquinas's view that the reflexivity of human intelligence must be mediated by the initial understanding of external objects. This sounds 'Plotinian'. On the other hand (whatever his position may have been on that issue), more 'Proclean', as well as Trinitarian, sounds Eckhart's insistence that the human intelligence in its radical inward 'spark' or 'divine image' lies in the divine simplicity beyond the doubling of reflection. (The intelligence of the divine 'henads' or gods lies similarly beyond for Proclus.) See Ruedi Imbach, 'Le Prétendue primauté de l'être sur le connaître: perspectives cavalières sur Thomas d'Aquin et l'école dominicain allemande', in J. Jolivet et al. (eds.) *Lectiones Varietates: Hommage a Paul Vignaux (1904–1987)* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1991) pp. 121–32; F.-X. Putallaz, *Les Sens de la Réflexion chez Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1991); Alain de Libera, *La Mystique rhénane d'Albert le Grand à Maître Eckhart* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1994). p. 243.

⁵⁰ See the multi-volume work of Olivier-Thomas Venard, *Thomas d'Aquin, Poète Théologien*. So far published, Volume 1, *Littérature et Théologie: une Saison en Enfer*; Volume 2, *La Langue de l'Ineffable: Essai sur le fondement théologique de la métaphysique* (Geneva: Ad Solem, 2002–4). The second volume generously takes up and extends certain of my theses about language and creativity, but with a greater rigour and explication.

⁵¹ Alain de Libera, *La Mystique rhénane: D'Albert le Grand à Maître Eckhart*, pp. 231–317.

hypostasized wisdom is the first of God's works. (For Cusa, as later for Bérulle, to exist as created gift must mean to exist by giving oneself to oneself and this is first of all shown in the reflexive structure of the created intelligences – even if this reflection is mediated by a knowledge of other things besides oneself.)⁵² But this does *not* subsume theology into gnostic speculation, precisely in the measure that philosophy itself is now seen as bound to the modes of art, history and liturgy – thus for Cusa, as already arguably for Aquinas, there can only be for us truth *tout court* because the Truth has redemptively become incarnate in time.⁵³

There is one final but crucial point to be made about Eckhart in particular. His project (in this respect like that of Dante) involved the communication to the laity in the vernacular of the speculative and mystical Catholic tradition that centred on analogical participation. His condemnation in some measure interrupted this process, which one can think of as constituting the heart of my 'shadow modernity'. Instead one got the neo-scholastic (Protestant as well as Catholic) reservation to the clergy of a positivized theological discourse on the one hand and the emergence within the new theological space of 'pure nature' of a sheerly secular discourse – dangerously poised between liberalism and positivism – on the other.

I hope that this newly extended genealogy helps better to explain why I see myself as *radically* traditional in Catholic terms, rather than as conservatively orthodox or conventionally liberal. Crucial for me now is the idea of two alternative 'modern' traditions that reach back into neo-Platonism itself, plus the thesis that a post-nominalist realism has to be both a more drastically mystical and a more humanistic realism.

In terms of mysticism this may mean something like Eckhart's radical mysticism of identity, required by a deeper exploration of the idea of divine creation. But this is balanced (in accordance with the other, 'sophiological' side of the *aporia* of creation *ex nihilo*) by a humanism which gives initial and co-equally final primacy to the descent of God in the Incarnation. In this event, according to Pierre Bérulle (the French seventeenth-century Oratorian General who lies firmly within the lineages which I have just been discussing), God creates 'more than God' since he here makes up for the necessary divine lack of the worship of himself as an experience of grateful dependence. (This consideration need not necessarily imply an ontological necessity for incarnation.) Thus if, for Eckhart, the human soul in its ground creates itself (though in terms of Trinitarian relationality), Bérulle balances this notion with the thought that God himself has from eternity contingently received himself as something created.

⁵² Nicholas of Cusa, *De Visione Dei* 7; *De Dato Patris Luminum* 2; Pierre Bérulle, *Oeuvres de la Piété* xxxii–xxxiii (Paris: Cerf, 1995–6) pp. 32, 33. See also Mojsisch, *Meister Eckhart*, p. 131, Henri de Lubac, *Pic de la Mirandole* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1974) pp. 334–5 and Claude Bruaire, *L'être et l'esprit* (Paris: PUF, 1983) esp. pp. 9–88.

⁵³ See Nicholas of Cusa, *De Docta Ignorantia*, III 3; Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, pp. 60–88; S.-T. Bonino, 'La théologie de la vérité dans *La Lectura super Ioannem* de Saint Thomas d'Aquin', in *Revue Thomist*, *Veritas* special issue, Jan–June 2004, pp. 141–66.

So in the Incarnation, God as God was able perfectly to fulfil the worship of God which is nevertheless, as worship, only possible for the creature.⁵⁴ This descent is repeated and perpetuated in the eucharist which gives rise to the *ecclesia*, that always 'other-governed' rather than autonomous human community, which yet is the beginning of universal community as such, since it is nothing other than the lived project of universal reconciliation. *Not* reducible to its institutional failures and yet not to be seen as a utopia *either*, since the reality of reconciliation, of restored unity-in-disparity, must presuppose itself if it is to be realizable (always in some very small degree) in time and so must be always already begun. The Incarnation was the 'impossible' arrival of that always-already and for that reason involved the coincidence of a finite personality with an infinite *hypostasis*. The concrete social realization of this always-already must run, as Rowan Williams frequently emphasizes, only through and despite the mess of constant institutional wranglings and re-negotiations, as well as inter-personal tribulations (since we must not forget that 'Church' may most be there when two or three idly or perplexedly wander besides a river). *Although* ontologically non-reactive, it is always temporally present *despite* temporal false deprivations.

Therefore I hope that my integrated discourse in this book which is at once that of reason and of faith and also – both fortunately and lamentably – of neither, successfully points beyond both liberalism and positivism in every sense. It was not intended as offering either simply the formal nor simply the chosen, but rather as aspiring to echo, however remotely, the sounding shapes of shared celestial glory.

The text of this second edition has been in places slightly modified (especially in Part Four) to ensure that it is more in keeping with my original intentions, as well as substantially in line with my current thinking. In particular, I have adjusted my presentation of the thought of Deleuze; slightly modified my account of de Lubac;⁵⁵ rendered the account of Plato and Socratic dialectics still more positive; and removed exaggerations of the differences between Augustine and Aquinas. At several points in the text certain claims have been somewhat qualified or re-configured.

I have also corrected factual mistakes, grammatical solecisms, diacritical superfluities and some of the grosser stylistic infelicities. I hope that all these changes will render the book now more useful to the reader, and I have in addition provided several cross-references to my own more recent writings and to those within, or sympathetic to, the 'Radically Orthodox' perspective. Here again I hope that this will assist readers to make connections between some older and some newer thoughts. The alterations do not, however, amount to a complete revision. I felt that this would be inappropriate, first

⁵⁴ Pierre Bérulle, *Oeuvres de la Piété* XIII. And see Jean-Louis Chrétien's wonderful essay, 'The offering of the world', in *The Ark of Speech*, trans. Andrew Brown (London: Routledge, 2004) pp. 111–49.

⁵⁵ This needs to be supplemented by my new book *The Suspended Middle*.

of all because the book belongs to a specific time and place of composition and secondly because adequate modifications would have made an already very long book impossibly long. Ideally I feel that the book should say more about the Middle Ages, more about the history of rights theory, more about certain intersections of theory with practice (for example in relation to 'charity') and more about the social, narrative and ontological ideas of the Bible itself, particularly St Paul. However, to some extent I or else others have tried to make good these deficiencies elsewhere.⁵⁶ Yet others, quite independently, have done work that also tends in these directions.⁵⁷

I would like to thank everyone who took the time to read the first edition of this book, and still more all those who have done me the honour of writing about it, whether positively, negatively or critically. Their responses have already rendered it a different book from the one that I wrote and all have contributed to the making of this new edition.

Thanks are due also to Andrew Humphries and other editors at Blackwell who saw this second edition through to production.

Finally I should like to express my gratitude to Rebecca Harkin, Publisher for Blackwell's religion and theology list, who suggested that I prepare this revised version in the first place and managed to overcome my considerable reluctance to do so.

Southwell, Nottinghamshire, May 2005

⁵⁶ See in particular, for a brief treatment of Pauline political theology and a response to critical discussions of my ecclesiology by Rowan Williams, Fergus Kerr and others, John Milbank, 'Enclaves, or, where is the Church' in *New Blackfriars*, special issue, pp. 341–52. See also, John Milbank, 'The invocation of Clio', in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, March 2005, pp. 3–45 for an extensive response to the *Journal of Religious Ethics* special issue (summer 2004) (see nn. 6, 26 above). The various sections of my response on historical method, Augustine and fallenness, Kant and Swedenborg, charity and sympathy and John Ruskin, all supply in effect crucial footnotes to different sections of *Theology and Social Theory*. There was no space to include a further section on Brian Tierney's important treatment of the history of rights theory, but I hope to publish this material in some form in the future. Briefly, I accept Tierney's contention against Richard Tuck (whom I substantially follow in chapter 1 of this book) that something like 'claim rights' are well-rooted in medieval corporate law independently of nominalism-voluntarism. However, I contend that the presence of a notion of a right to claim an objective *ius* to the possession of something, or relatively free disposal of it, does not amount to a liberal grounding of right in self-ownership or absolute ownership, since it is still granted by equitable distribution in the first place, nor imply that a free and rightful disposing of something need not be always primarily attentive to considerations of the common good. Where Tierney locates a genuine shift towards liberalism in Bonaventure and Godfrey of Fontaines and rightly notes that these are independent of nominalism, he does not fully take cognizance of the fact that they are still linked to tendencies that stress the priority of will over intellect (with a linked tendency to follow Abelard in shifting the moral focus from act to intention and motivation) and lean towards a univocal conception of perfection terms as well as of the interaction of divine and human causality. For logical reasons it was within this broad current that nominalism and a more extreme voluntarism later arose.

⁵⁷ See in particular, on the Bible, Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996).

Introduction

This book is addressed both to social theorists and to theologians. To social theorists I shall attempt to disclose the possibility of a sceptical demolition of modern, secular social theory from a perspective with which it is at variance: in this case, that of Christianity. I will try to demonstrate that all the most important governing assumptions of such theory are bound up with the modification or the rejection of orthodox Christian positions. These fundamental intellectual shifts are, I shall argue, no more rationally 'justifiable' than the Christian positions themselves.

The book can, therefore, be read as an exercise in sceptical relativism. If my Christian perspective is persuasive, then this should be a persuasion intrinsic to the Christian *logos* itself, not the apologetic mediation of a supposedly neutral human reason. However, to theologians, I offer my perspectival reading for positive appropriation. What follows is intended to overcome the pathos of modern theology, and to restore in postmodern terms, the possibility of theology as a metadiscourse.

The pathos of modern theology is its false humility. For theology, this must be a fatal disease, because once theology surrenders its claim to be a metadiscourse, it cannot any longer articulate the word of the creator God, but is bound to turn into the oracular voice of some finite idol, such as historical scholarship, humanist psychology, or transcendental philosophy. If theology no longer seeks to position, qualify or criticize other discourses, then it is inevitable that these discourses will position theology: for the necessity of an ultimate organizing logic (as I shall argue in Part Four) cannot be wished away. A theology 'positioned' by secular reason suffers two characteristic forms of confinement. Either it idolatrously connects knowledge of God with some particular immanent field of knowledge – 'ultimate' cosmological causes, or 'ultimate' psychological and subjective needs. Or else it is confined to intimations of a sublimity beyond representation, so functioning to confirm negatively the questionable idea of an autonomous secular realm, completely transparent to rational understanding.

I have chosen to contest this secular positioning of theology within one particular field: that of social theory. This is the most obvious site of struggle, 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. It is important to realize that my entire case is constructed from a complete *concession* as to this state of affairs, and that the book offers no proposed restoration of a pre-modern Christian position. However, there is a very common perception amongst theologians that once this concession is made, most of what is to be known about social processes in general and the socio-historical 'aspects' (an unwarranted qualification) of Christianity in particular, must be learned from social scientists. Contemporary 'political theologians' tend to fasten upon a particular social theory, or else put together their own eclectic theoretical mix, and then work out what residual place is left for Christianity and theology within the reality that is supposed to be authoritatively described by such a theory. Curiously enough, theologians appear specially eager to affirm both the 'scientific' and the 'humanist' discourses of modernity, although one can, perhaps, suggest reasons for this. First, the faith of humanism has become a substitute for a transcendent faith now only half-subscribed to. Second, there is a perceived need to discover precisely how to fulfil Christian precepts about charity and freedom in contemporary society in an uncontroversial manner, involving cooperation with the majority of non-Christian fellow citizens. Purportedly scientific diagnoses and recommendations fulfil precisely this role.

Yet the alliance of theology with the modernist legacy of social theory from the nineteenth century, which is at once 'scientific' and 'humanist', appears all the more curious in the light of recent developments within social theory itself. First of all, those 'postmodernist' thinkers broadly influenced by Nietzsche have tended to dismantle the claims both of sociology and the Marxist-Hegelian tradition to uncover the governing factors of human association and to tell naturalistic, evolutionary stories about the whole of human history. While the Nietzschean tracing of cultural formations to the will-to-power still results in a 'suspicion' of religion, it also tends to assert the inevitably religious or mythic-ritual shape that these formations must take. In this mode of suspicion, therefore, there ceases to be any social or economic reality that is permanently more 'basic' than the religious.

Secondly, the question has now arisen for social theory as to whether Nietzschean suspicion is the final and truly non-metaphysical mode of secular reason, or else itself embodies an ontology of power and conflict which is simply another *mythos*, a kind of re-invented paganism. To pass critically beyond Nietzsche is to pass into a recognition of the necessity and yet the ungrounded character of some sort of metanarrative, some privileged transcendent factor, even when it comes disguised as the constant element in an immanent process. At this new critical juncture, which is postmodern, yet also post-Nietzschean, one recognizes that suppositions about transcendence are ungrounded and mutually incommensurable, although necessary for the slightest cultural decision. This idea of the critical non-avoidability of the theological and metaphysical is canvassed in very diverse yet not wholly

disconnected ways by Alasdair MacIntyre, Gillian Rose (despite the fact that her project cannot be strictly classified as either postmodern or post-Nietzschean), René Girard and Guy Lardreau with Christian Jambet.

An extraordinary contrast therefore emerges between political theology on the one hand, and postmodern and post-Nietzschean social theory on the other. Theology accepts secularization and the autonomy of secular reason; social theory increasingly finds secularization paradoxical, and implies that the mythic-religious can never be left behind. Political theology is intellectually atheistic; post-Nietzschean social theory suggests the practical inescapability of worship.

The present book attempts to take cognizance of this strange situation, and to persuade theologians to acknowledge theoretical developments which they have woefully ignored. I wish to challenge both the idea that there is a significant sociological 'reading' of religion and Christianity, which theology must 'take account of', and the idea that theology must borrow its diagnoses of social ills and recommendations of social solutions entirely from Marxist (or usually sub-Marxist) analysis, with some sociological admixture. Two of the central chapters of this book, chapter 5, 'Policing the Sublime' and chapter 7, 'Founding the Supernatural' are devoted to these respective purposes.

However, these attempts can only carry conviction if I succeed in demonstrating the questionability of the assumptions upon which secular social theory rests. To this end I have adopted an 'archaeological' approach and traced the genesis of the main forms of secular reason, in such a fashion as to unearth the arbitrary moments in the construction of their logic. This object could have been partially achieved by a deconstructive analysis of the present manifestations of these discourses, but the archaeological approach has at least two inestimable advantages. First of all, it enables me to show how the genesis of discourse is intertwined with the genesis of a new practice; in particular this allows me to demonstrate that secular social theory *only applies* to secular society, which it helps to sustain. Secondly, it permits me to show just how elusive 'the secular' really is. For, on my reading, secular discourse does not just borrow inherently inappropriate modes of expression from religion as the only discourse to hand (this is Hans Blumenberg's interpretation)¹, but is actually *constituted* in its secularity by 'heresy' in relation to orthodox Christianity, or else a rejection of Christianity that is more 'neo-pagan' than simply anti-religious.

By taking the reader through this genetic account, I hope to make it apparent that 'scientific' social theories are themselves theologies or anti-theologies in disguise. Contemporary theologies which forge alliances with such theories are often unwittingly rediscovering concealed affinities between positions that partake of the same historical origins.

¹ Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1986) pp. 3–120.

The book is divided into four sub-treatises, corresponding to four distinct variants of secular reason. The first treatise, 'Theology and Liberalism' is a prolegomenon to the next three, because it is in the discourses of liberalism – 'scientific politics' and political economy – that the secular is first constructed. Here I show that from the outset the secular is complicit with an 'ontology of violence', a reading of the world which assumes the priority of force and tells how this force is best managed and confined by counter-force. Secular reason has continued to make this ontology seem coterminous with the discovery of the human construction of the cultural world; I seek to demonstrate that the latter is a distinct thesis and that human construction does not *necessarily* mark out an autonomous human space. It was made to do so by Hobbes, but other early modern thinkers construe human making as an opening to transcendence, so inaugurating a kind of 'counter-modernity' which later, through the writings of Vico, Hamann, Herder, Coleridge, Kierkegaard and Blondel, continues to shadow actual, secular modernity.

The theme of the human construction of culture is, however, aporetically crossed in secular reason by the idea of the cultural construction of humanity. Where this moment is privileged, secular reason produces a discourse about providence, which, unlike medieval theology, violates the distinction between primary and secondary causes, and invokes a final cause – 'God' or 'nature' – to plug some supposed gap in immanent understanding. This kind of fusion of theological and scientific discourse has been identified by Amos Funkenstein.² However, he sees it as terminating with Kant. I see it as an element in political economy, and even as reinforced in the intellectual moves which generate 'sociology'.

The second part of the book, 'Theology and Positivism', traces this genesis. It stresses in particular how there is a very complex, and by no means merely oppositional, relationship between theology and positivism; the latter term in fact indicates a wider field of affinities than is commonly supposed. In this expanded sense, *all* sociology, including Weberian sociology, turns out to be positivist, and this has implications for how theology should relate to sociological theses. In effect, theology encounters in sociology only a theology, and indeed a church in disguise, but a theology and a church dedicated to promoting a certain secular consensus. The final chapter of Part Two seeks to 'end' the dialogue between theology and sociology.

The third part of the book, 'Theology and Dialectics', shows how the most radical and critical elements in Hegelian-Marxist tradition are precisely those which come nearest to deconstructing the secular, and, in the case of Hegel, to promoting a *thinking* which embodies a specifically Christian *logos*, 'beyond secular reason'. However they allow these moments to be entirely re-recruited by scientific politics and political economy, conjoining these to Christianity (Hegel) or Utopia (Marx) by the thread of a 'gnostic' plot about a historically

² Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

necessary fall and reconstruction of being, with a gain achieved through violence undergone. The final chapter of this section seeks to show how theology which is over-enthusiastic about Marxism (and sociology), and underrates an earlier tradition of specifically Christian socialism, is itself a theology which has surrendered to liberalism in the form of transcendental philosophy.

In all three of these treatises, the reader will discern two often confused and yet different voices speaking. The first is that of the classical and medieval inheritance: a 'MacIntyrean voice' that is Platonic-Aristotelian-Augustinian-Thomist, opposing the modern 'management of power' in the name of ancient virtue, or common consensus round metaphysically secured values. The second is a 'nihilistic voice' which offers a historicizing critique, seeking to show that every supposedly objective reasoning simply promotes its own difference, and disguises the power which is its sole support.

The final treatise of the book, 'Theology and Difference', makes explicit the character of this nihilism, disentangles the two voices, and pits them against each other. The real perspective of the book then turns out to be that of virtue rather than nihilistic difference. However, there are two further twists which partially separate my work from that of MacIntyre. First, I reject MacIntyre's merely *philosophic* realism in favour of 'linguistic idealism' and a variant of pragmatism – even though this assumes a realist cast within my final *theological* perspective. Secondly, my perspective is that of *Christian virtue*, and I contend that this is more critical of antique virtue than MacIntyre allows; that it is, in fact, a kind of synthesis of virtue with difference, and stands over against both antiquity and modernity.

Indeed, I argue that, from the perspective of Christian virtue, there emerges to view a hidden thread of continuity between antique reason and modern, secular reason. This thread of continuity is the theme of 'original violence'. Antique thought and politics assumes some naturally given element of chaotic conflict which must be tamed by the stability and self-identity of reason. Modern thought and politics (most clearly articulated by Nietzsche) 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 economies and sovereign politics. If one tries, like MacIntyre, to oppose antique thought to modern thought, then the attempt will fail because antique thought – as Plato already saw in *The Sophist* – is deconstructible into 'modern' thought: a cosmos including both chaos and reason implies an ultimate principle, the 'difference' between the two, which is *more* than reason, and enshrines a permanent conflict.

Christianity, however, 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). Such a Christian logic is *not* deconstructible by modern secular reason; rather, it is Christianity which exposes the non-necessity of supposing, like the Nietzscheans, that difference, non-totalization and indeterminacy of meaning *necessarily* imply arbitrariness and violence. To suppose that they do is merely to subscribe to a particular encoding of reality. Christianity, by contrast, is the coding of transcendental difference as peace.

This vital argument is made in my last chapter, where I briefly try to sketch out a theology aware of itself as culturally constructed, yet able to elaborate its own self-understanding in terms of a substantive and critical theory of society in general. The emergent 'third voice' of this final chapter, beyond both antique virtue and nihilistic difference, picks up the shadowy hints of a 'counter-modern' position – historicist and pragmatist, yet *theologically* realist – as suggested in particular by Maurice Blondel. In such a position, no claim is made simplistically to 'represent' an objective social reality; instead, the social knowledge advocated is but the continuation of ecclesial practice, the imagination in action of a peaceful, reconciled social order, beyond even the violence of legality. It is this lived narrative which itself both projects and 'represents' the triune God, who is transcendental peace through differential relation. And the same narrative is also a continuous reading and positioning of other social realities. If truth is social, it can only be through a claim to offer the ultimate 'social science' that theology can establish itself and give any content to the notion of 'God'. And in practice, providing such a content means making an historical difference in the world.

As I shall finally argue, the difference that Christianity has made includes a tragic dimension, because its failure to sustain a 'peace beyond the law' enabled a transition from the antique containing of a given violence by reason, to the modern regulation of violence through greater violence. Yet the capacity of nihilism to deconstruct antiquity shows that there can be no going back; only Christian theology now offers a discourse able to position and overcome nihilism itself. This is why it is so important to reassert theology as a master discourse; theology, alone, remains the discourse of non-mastery.