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Books In Review

Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason

Postmodern Christian Traditionalism?

Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason. By John Milbank. *Basil Blackwell. 443 pp. $64.95.*

Reviewed by Ian Markham

John Milbank does not get a very good press in Britain. He is viewed as a young upstart who is breaking the accepted conventions of Christian ethics. His main crime is that he wants to develop the Christendom tradition that many regard as a dead end. The Christendom Group was a movement that played a part in British social thinking during the 1930s and 1940s. Its members argued that secularism was deeply destructive in its cultural effects and that it was necessary to develop a Christian analysis of society that would challenge secular assumptions. In North America such ideas ought to be acceptable–or at least not unfamiliar. Alasdair MacIntyre, among others, has in recent years made respectable this sort of approach to ethical questions. Milbank shares MacIntyre's approach; his rigorous ethical reflection is based on a careful historical analysis of modern culture.

It is indeed one of the unnoticed achievements of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* that it rehabilitated a tradition of ethical reflection that had gone out of fashion. His work has stimulated a lively conversation and debate, with substantial contributions coming from scholars like Jeffrey Stout and Stanley Hauerwas. But prior to Milbank, there had been nothing of equal substance from Britain.

Milbank's project is ambitious. He wants to be nothing less than a postmodern Christian traditionalist. He is postmodern in that he rejects the realist claim that traditions are in the business of making coherent sense of the world and that certain traditions do this better than others. Instead he believes that we must accept that we are trapped within our culturally determined traditions, with no way of knowing which tradition best describes the world. This postmodern historicism dominates most of Milbank's discussion.

In Milbank's approach to ethics, there are only different narratives with different political implications. He employs his historicism to argue that secular liberal modernity is simply a "theological faith" resting on an "ontology of violence," by which he means "a reading of the world which assumes the priority of force and tells how this force is best managed and confined by counterforces." Modernity assumes that society is made up of isolated individuals needing to be controlled. But this assumption, Milbank insists, is a theological judgment about human nature that is neither more nor less "justified" than any other theological judgment. Secular modernity is not, as it supposes itself to be, an understanding of reality objectively superior to earlier understandings; it is rather a narrative highly damaging in its effects resting on assumptions no more legitimate or illegitimate than those of a Christian narrative.

Having dealt with the underlying assumptions of modernity, Milbank moves on to the great post–Enlightenment worldview (or–as he prefers–meta–narrative) of Marxism. The Hegelian–Marxist tradition, in Milbank's view, rightly exposes the violent nature of capitalism, but it is itself still trapped in the assumptions of "secular reason." This one–sided critique by Marxists of capitalism needs to be criticized by Christian socialists, whose tradition can challenge the assumptions of modernity. Any theology that bases itself on Marxist analysis will be working with secular assumptions; thus liberation theology "has been simply another effort to reinterpret Christianity in terms of the dominant secular discourse of our day."

In the last section of the book, Milbank confronts the postmodernist abyss of nihilism. In a superb critique of Nietzsche, he illustrates that at root the most likely political expression of a nihilistic critique will be fascist. If there are only different ways of looking at the world, then the strongest will be the one to prevail. But while Milbank wants to reject nihilism, he does not want to opt for the critical realism of MacIntyre. Milbank finds MacIntyre's position untenable: "MacIntyre, of course, wants to argue against this stoic–liberal–nihilist tendency, which is secular reason. My case is rather that it is only mythos, and therefore cannot be refuted, but only out–narrated, if we persuade people–for reasons of 'literary taste'–that Christianity offers a much better story."

How does Milbank suppose that he can be genuinely postmodern and yet a traditional Christian? How can one be historicist without being nihilist? Milbank's proposal is ingenious. It is true, he says, that all we have is a range of different traditions, and decisions between traditions cannot be made on some "tradition–transcendent grounds." Yet it is possible that one of these traditions might in fact be the truth. This is what the Christian narrative claims to be: It is a meta–discourse that can and should embrace all human life and activity. So in a brilliant ironic move, Milbank turns out to be antirealist about everything except God.

But can this work? There is something quite odd in affirming the Christian narrative as a meta–discourse and yet with equal tenacity denying any legitimate rational engagement between traditions. Milbank believes that one is not persuaded by good reasons to move from one tradition to another, that one cannot have dialogue between traditions in a quest for the truth, and that one cannot know that one's tradition describes reality in a "more complete" way than any of the alternatives. All one can do is "convert" (in a fideistic sense) and enact the narrative in one's life.

This sounds like the worst of all worlds. For Richard Rorty, one is simply inventing a way of looking at the world; for Alasdair MacIntyre, one is trying to describe the world; for Milbank, one describes the world, but in what appears to be simply a personal and arbitrary way. Milbank will not accept MacIntyre's idea of a tradition that "explains more," yet is quite happy with the notion of a tradition that "out–narrates."

But why is one not able to take the fact that the secular narrative is so destructive as a reason for rejecting it? Milbank's objection is that one is then appealing to a tradition–transcendent rationality. But perhaps not. The whole point of Aquinas' cosmological argument is that the intelligibility of the universe is evidence for the existence of God. One could argue that the critically realist instinct is evidence for the truth of the Christian narrative. This would mean that instead of sinking as Milbank does into a postmodern theological realism that is both fideistic and exclusive (in the sense that it excludes as "untrue" all other traditions), one can be taken up with a commitment to dialogue, which feeds on the insights within other traditions under the umbrella of rational inquiry that itself is both within and yet evidence for the truth of the Christian narrative.

The advantage of a critical realism would resolve some ambiguities in Milbank's approach to history. As noted, he proceeds in general on historicist assumptions. For example, when criticizing Wayne Meeks, he explains that one cannot get to a "pre–textual genesis." But sometimes he forgets. Thus, when he criticizes the liberal Protestant meta–narrative as it initially appeared in Weber, he concludes: "Hence Weber was simply wrong to discover in ancient Judaism the germs of a 'protestant' religion . . ."; and later, "there is no reason to suppose any identifiable Christianity before the emer–gence of strong ecclesial themes . . . "; and once again, "it is not true that before the Pope's assumption of imperial powers, the Church was an essentially 'spiritual' body of individuals." For Milbank, Weber was wrong and his ideas are simply not true. Milbank's language suggests strongly that the historical judgments of Weber are less appropriate than the historical judgments of Milbank. But what are the criteria by which he makes these judgments? One concludes that it must be some sort of objective history that can be described in better or worse ways. This will not do for a postmodern historicist.

Yet for all the questions and criticisms that arise about this dense and difficult book, it is at the same time quite brilliant. One wishes it were more accessible, but the work is undoubtedly a tour de force. As Milbank moves from Lancaster to Cambridge, we await his further work with great anticipation.

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