

# **Educative Violence or Suffering Love? Radical Orthodoxy and Radical Reformation**

*P. Travis Kroeker*

## **I**

If there is one thing orthodox Roman Catholics and orthodox mainstream Reformers agreed on in the sixteenth century, it was that the Anabaptists and so-called radical reformers were radically heterodox. They also agreed that these heretical Christians, who proposed creating a visible church that seeks to enact the lordship of Christ through a literal following of his teaching and example, were disturbing the peace and should be coercively restrained, and indeed executed, as heretics and subversives. Thus the radical reformers became the accidental victims – to use John Milbank’s terms – of the more physical but more measured exercise of violence of the pre-modern church in both mainstream forms that were pursuing the peace of Radical Orthodoxy. One may read about this accidental, measured violence in that classic of the Radical Reformation, *The Bloody Theatre or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians Who Baptized only Upon Confession of Faith, and Who Suffered and Died for the Testimony of Jesus their Savior*. Anabaptists therefore may have something at stake, literally, in questioning Milbank’s sweeping assertion that modern liberal enlightenment is less generous, less benevolent and indeed more violent, than the educative violence of pre-modern Christian orthodoxy.

However, what is at stake here is not that the radical reformers were victims who might have been saved under more liberal political authorities. What is at stake is how radical reformers might understand Milbank’s claim that Christianity leads to violence because (a) it is a universalizing religion, and (b) it aims so high. The Radical Reformation would agree with Milbank that violence is indeed “entirely unavoidable insofar as it runs the educative risks of redemption,” but it would suggest that such violence is unleashed by unredeemed, fallen intuitions and desires when they resist the apocalyptic claims and reconciling overtures of divine love such as are displayed by the servant Christ and visibly imitated by the body of Christ in temporal existence. There is no question here of “pious neutrality” even though the option of “violent defense” is rejected. But this issue cannot be critically clarified by

pointing to examples for imitation such as Jeanne d'Arc – a female lay warrior whose ethic is equally attractive to cyberculture, Hollywood, and Milbank, it seems, because it risks the embodied erotic enactment of the militant battle for relative goods – a very mysterious and fragile charity indeed (not least because it is dying for France, *pro patria mori*). We have other examples for imitation, no less engaged politically and erotically – though much less romantic and much more challenging both for individuals and for communities. The claim of the radical reformers that evoked such violent orthodox fury in their mainline opponents was that the example for imitation is the servant Messiah, who rules not through educative domination but through suffering love. This example, moreover, is not of peaceableness as an individual virtue but as a communal gift that can only be received and shared through the spiritual disciplines of the eucharistic community as enacted in the service of the larger good of the culture.

I want to challenge Milbank's Radical Orthodoxy account of ecclesiology with reference to a Radical Reformation account which, no less than his, understands the church as the eucharistic community that is also a "counter-polity exercising a counter-sovereignty." This counter-sovereignty is authorized by the cosmic rule of the slain Lamb that rejects the politics-as-usual conditions of human rule, both psychic and political – including that of educative violence. The point of this apocalyptic counter-sovereignty is to embody politically in the world the divine process of reconciliation, and Christian theology must understand itself to be accountable to this process.

## II

Let me begin with Milbank's agreement with Jean-Luc Marion that theology is authorized by the Eucharist. In *God Without Being* (1995) Marion shows how a truly educative theological hermeneutic is a eucharistic hermeneutic, through a wonderful interpretation of Jesus' post-resurrection appearance on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24). Marion points out that the disciples recognize Jesus when he enacts the Eucharist; then he vanishes from their sight, and they say to each other: "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?" Marion comments:

In fact, the Word, at the eucharistic moment, does not disappear so much as the disciples, who eating his body and drinking his

blood, discover themselves assimilated to the one whom they assimilate and recognize inwardly; the Word does not disappear to their sight so much as they themselves disappear as blinded individuals, literally astray on paths that lead nowhere. They enter into the place of the Word, and now, like him, they go up to Jerusalem . . . . (151)

Did the disciples go up to Jerusalem to become bishops? Unlike Marion and Milbank, I do not think this passage authorizes the formulation that the bishop, as the presider over the Eucharist and thus invested by the *persona Christi*, is therefore the true theologian. At least Marion, unlike Milbank, does two important things: (1) he develops his account in relation to a biblical interpretation (Milbank only ever refers to Nicholas of Cusa's ecclesiology of the *corpus mysticum*, which has no biblical tradition;<sup>1</sup> and (2) he suggests that this assimilation to the *persona Christi* entailed in theological hermeneutics aims at the referent, aims to express the Word, not only discursively but existentially by reduplicating Christ's holiness in one's own life. "He who claims to go beyond the text as far as the Word must therefore know whereof he speaks: to know, by experience, charity; in short, 'to have learned from what he suffered' (Heb. 5:8) like Christ" (Marion, 155). What Christ has opened to these disciples in the scriptures is the difficult teaching, the foolish wisdom of God that causes everyone to stumble (1 Cor. 1), namely that the Messiah enters into his glory only by suffering (Luke 24:25f.). So also does the messianic community, according to the radical reformers, since this is the very power of God made visible in the world, but not in lofty words of wisdom or persuasive rhetoric out-narrating all rivals (to say nothing of the aristocratic hierarchies of the medieval *corpus mysticum*).<sup>2</sup>

This takes us from theologians to political theology, the mediation of the peace of Christ to the whole human community. This too is closely tied to the liturgical meaning of the Eucharist both for the Radical Reformation and for Radical Orthodoxy. Again, the implications are vastly different and turn on very different interpretations of Christ's "real presence" in the Eucharist. Where Milbank focuses on such formulations as "absolutization of self-critique without absolutization of the self making the critique" and on a recondite retrieval of Nicholas of Cusa's aristocratic hierarchical democracy as a model for a neo-Christendom socialism, the radical reformers seek the restoration

of true humanity in the image of Christ made possible only in the “penitent existence,” as Menno Simons calls it. For Menno the truth of this image and existence is discerned only with reference to the “slain Lamb” who rules in the heavenly city, a rule mediated on earth in the suffering servant church. To awaken and remain attentive to this truth requires rebirth into a new creation and the existential practice of the disciplines of the penitential life. It is a truth that is transparent neither in the intuitions of the fallen human heart nor to the rulers of this age with their false ontologies.

Suffice it to say that these examples confirm that this is neither simply an inner matter of the heart nor an individualistic experience. It is a being reborn into the true nature of divine love that becomes visible in the world, through embodied conformity to the mind of Christ in the body of Christ that imitates the spiritual motion of serving love displayed by the divinely human Christ. If the pattern is true, then its nature cannot be an abstract, formal, or “supernatural” ideal; it must hold in all aspects of existence. That is the premise of existential Radical Reformation theology: the Gospel is not an unattainable ideal presided over by the church as the custodian of orthodox doctrine and otherworldly hope while the realities of worldly justice are addressed by other more attainable means. The body of Christ therefore must be interpreted as the real presence of this pattern of suffering love as a new mind and a new nature. Baptism represents “the true new birth with its fruits” of obedience to the inner word.<sup>3</sup> The Lord’s Supper conforms the outer sign to its true referent – the body of Christ in which participants become “flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone” and incarnate this kenotic messianic pattern in all of life.

There is therefore, as John Howard Yoder suggests in his “Christian Case for Democracy,” a retrieval of New Testament realism about the nature of political power in the fallen world, combined with an ethic of messianic discernment proposing a radically different paradigm. In Luke’s gospel this too is dramatically revealed in a eucharistic setting (Luke 22). Immediately after Jesus utters the words of eucharistic institution, a dispute (*philoneikia*) arises among the disciples about who will betray him and who will be regarded (*dokein*) as the greatest. Jesus says to them: “The rulers of the nations lord it over them,” a factual description of worldly authority as dominion, “and those who exercise authority (*exousia*, power) let themselves be called (*pace* Milbank, the middle voice of the Greek is not always to be trusted) benefactors

(*euergetai*, doers of good works)” – a factual description of their claims to moral legitimacy and righteous intention. “But,” says Jesus, “it shall not be so among you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves (*diakonia*). . . . I am among you as one who serves.” The parallels in Matt. 20 and Mark 10 link greatness to the question, “Can you drink the cup I am about to drink?” This is the cup of suffering, the violence unleashed by the Messiah’s unwillingness to reconcile through educative violence, and whose display of God’s image and authority in serving love offends the norms and instincts of nature that seeks another way.

### III

Just to end on a provocative metaphysical note: In 1 Cor. 1:28 Paul links the *kletos* of the *ekklesia*, the calling of those called to embody the *nous* of Christ in holiness, to a vision of radical humility, the foolish power of the cross that itself is tied to the divine power and wisdom depicted not as plenitude but as emptiness: “God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not (*ta me onta*) in order to bring to nothing *ta onta* (the things that are).” God makes this ontology nothing so that flesh (*pasa sarka*) may not boast in God’s presence. Indeed, the divisions plaguing the church Paul attributes to the *sarkikoi* desires and ideologies plaguing the body of Christ. The pattern of reconciliation that he sets out radically relativizes all human noetic claims to orthodoxy (chapter 8), and replaces them with a eucharistic pattern of eating that does not eat and drink self-condemnation by betraying Christ into a doctrine to be imposed through aristocratic educative coercion. Rather, says Paul, imitate me as I imitate Christ. This becomes a warrant for the radical non-imposition of good. All things are lawful, but not all things build up: “Let no one seek his own good, but the good of the neighbor.” Thus Paul points to the kind of radical affinity modeled also by the Messiah who loves the least of these, and indeed the enemy, but never by employing the tragic violent means of a merely fleshly enemy.

The nature of this divine love into which Christ’s followers are reborn is no mere natural affinity. Rather, it radically transforms natural erotic affinities in a direction culminating in the celebratory assembly of the marriage feast of the slain Lamb. This language of holy erotic divine love pervades the writings of the sixteenth-century radical reformers, but I will end with something taken

from the *Martyrs Mirror*, another female lay exemplar by the name of Jeanne, not “of Arc,” but Janneken Munstdorp. While awaiting execution for heresy in Antwerp in 1573, she writes to her soon-to-be-orphaned infant daughter (born to her in prison), also named Janneken:

And now, Janneken, my dear lamb, who are yet very little and young, I leave you this letter, together with a gold coin, which I had with me in prison, and this I leave you for a perpetual adieu, and for a testament; that you may remember me by it, as also by this letter. Read it, when you have understanding, and keep it as long as you live in remembrance of me and your father. And I herewith bid you adieu, my dear Janneken Munstdorp, and kiss you heartily, my dear lamb, with a perpetual kiss of peace. Follow me and your father, and be not ashamed to confess us before the world, and this adulterous generation. Let it be your glory, that we did not die for any evil doing, and strive to do likewise, though they should also seek to kill you. And on no account cease to love God above all, for no one can prevent you from fearing God. If you follow that which is good, and seek peace, and ensue it, you shall receive the crown of eternal life; this crown I wish you and the crucified, bleeding, naked, despised, rejected and slain Jesus Christ for your bridegroom.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton University Press, 1997), 195.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>1</sup> The meaning of baptism is given as follows in the first article of the Schleitheim Confession (1527): “Baptism shall be given to all who have learned repentance and amendment of life, and who believe truly that their sins are taken away by Christ, and to all those who walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and wish to be buried with him in death, so that they might be resurrected with him.” Hence what is often referred to as believers’ baptism might just as well be called repenters’ baptism, as Timothy George suggests. See “The Spirituality of the Radical Reformation,” in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. Jill Raitt (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 346.