

## Is Milbank Niebuhrian Despite Himself?

*Gerald W. Schlabach*

With an intellectual debt to Catholic Augustinianism and a practicing commitment to Mennonite pacifism, I probably have as much sympathy for John Milbank's Radical Orthodoxy as anyone on this panel. But someone here must respond to Milbank's critique of pacifism, so I will endeavor to address the chapter in his forthcoming book that deals most directly with violence and pacifism.<sup>1</sup>

Milbank's earlier presentation of what he called an "ontology of peace" in his groundbreaking book *Theology and Social Theory* might have led readers to expect him to advocate some version of Christian pacifism.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps Mennonites, Hauerwasians, and Catholic Workers might be hopeful about this possibility. Meanwhile so-called Christian Realists and others who have arguably hijacked Augustinian orthodoxy would have been ready to pounce on such a development. In any case, Milbank has declined to comfort Christian pacifists. In chapter two of his forthcoming book, he attempts to explain why.

Milbank's argument has two parts. In part one, he accuses pacifists of averting their gaze from violence. This comes after he develops an intriguing intuition that something about gazing upon violence as passive spectacle is more violent than violence itself. The point is well taken when applied to the endless consumption of media violence in our culture, and with reference to how twenty-first century moderns look smugly back on the violence of previous centuries, given that the modern era has proved far more brutal than anything the crusades or inquisitions ever served up. But Milbank then goes on to argue that to *avert* our gaze from violence without responding through counter-violence is *also* covertly violent, because it leaves us complicit in violence. This move gives him a way to reject pacifism.

Christian pacifism is doubly suspect, in Milbank's view, because it is a counter-intuitive doctrine. It does not just challenge the intuitions of our *fallen* nature but runs counter to our good and God-given *created* nature, in particular our desire to protect our young and the innocent. Part two of Milbank's argument follows from this view. Pacifists, he contends, have "de-laicized" the Christian laity.<sup>3</sup> For Milbank, lay people live the Christian life in a way

that is embedded in embodied, biological, warm-blooded animal life in time. Embedded in ordinary time, the life of the Christian laity thus resists any cheap and easy participation in the eternal, thereby eschewing false claims to approximate the angelic life prematurely. Pacifists de-laicize the laity by asking Christians not to protect the innocent. Thus they delegitimize the created order itself.

What should Christian pacifists in the Mennonite or other Radical Reformation traditions say to this? In response to part one of Milbank's argument – that pacifists allegedly avert their gaze from violence – I can only respond bluntly: his critique is in some ways so ill-informed it is almost not worth dignifying with a response.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps his critique does apply to certain bourgeois liberal pacifists scattered through the twentieth-century academy, though even here he may be constructing straw men. If Milbank thinks Christian pacifism leads its practitioners to avert their gaze and settle easily into sectarian communities,<sup>5</sup> then he simply does not know enough about the practices that living peace church traditions have engendered. Even in the most sectarian communities where “nonresistance” would be the term of choice rather than “*active nonviolence*,” peace church people have been led to look longer, harder, and with deeper engagement upon situations of human violence than most Christians who have weapons available to obscure their gaze. Surely a little attention to empirical evidence is not a concession to secular social science.

The relevant fact is that historical peace churches have sent more people per capita into risky, uncomfortable mission and service assignments than mainline churches. I am tempted to ask a show of hands here in this gathering in order to indicate how many people have done service work in war zones, national security states, or military dictatorships – precisely out of their commitment to pacifism. Admittedly, the Mennonite track record is still not as good as Mennonite theology would have it, since that theology would call *all* Christians to risky discipleship. At least in the last decade or two, Mennonites have lost ground to many of the same phenomena of consumer capitalism that Milbank criticizes. Still, Mennonites are their own harshest critics in this regard, another sign this is not about averting one's gaze from violence, responding on the fly, or continuing to look at situations of violence merely as spectators.

Part two of Milbank's argument – that pacifism de-laicizes the laity – is somewhat stronger. If the claim is that pacifism is simply too much for ordinary Christians to take on, Mennonites may contest some of the assumptions behind that claim, but it is at least worth contesting. Mennonites are of course dubious about the very category of the laity, because they are dubious about an “angelic” clergy not rooted in the same soil, the same humus, as the whole Christian community. A single ethic of discipleship should apply to all believers. Yes, leaders, pastoral leaders, and others are called out of congregations; but since all believers are also called into ministry, the distinction between the leadership and other Christians is more functional than ontological. Perhaps Mennonite skepticism about the clergy/laity distinction will only confirm the problem Milbank thinks he sees in Christian pacifism. So let me take another tack, and suggest that the argument he makes over pacifism can be joined in a couple of different ways from within his orthodox framework.

Negatively, Milbank's discussion seems to suggest an uncharacteristically Niebuhrian form of putative Augustinianism. Milbank seems to render peaceable community life, in accordance with the ontology of peace, as what Reinhold Niebuhr called “an impossible possibility” at best. For Niebuhr, the transcendent, the eternal – the realm wherein an ethic of pure mutuality through pure self-sacrifice could function – was like Kant's noumenal realm. It was ultimately real, but currently inaccessible to all but a very few; even for them, Jesus' ethic constituted a “tangent toward eternity”<sup>6</sup> – and out of history.<sup>7</sup>

In Milbank's discussion of pacifism, the ontology of peace is in danger of the same fate. Yes, peaceableness is ultimately who we are, but not now, not for now, and not for most. Instead, it becomes an eschatological or teleological end, and not really a means at all; it is an ontology of peace devoid of an ethic or methodology of peace.<sup>8</sup> To make this essentially Niebuhrian move could be devastating for Milbank's entire project. As Eugene McCarragher has cogently argued, Niebuhr was the prototypical theologian for the emerging managerial class in twentieth-century America.<sup>9</sup> Milbank's Niebuhrian move risks turning over the secular realm precisely to that modern bureaucratic management that Milbank so despises and so well exposes.

More positively, I suggest it is possible to argue for pacifism even from within the framework of Thomas Aquinas's three basic precepts of the natural law.<sup>10</sup> At the first level, according to the natural inclinations we share with all

creatures (even inanimate objects) the first precept is self-preservation. Second is the precept that corresponds with the inclination we share with animals, that of procreation, and of care for the young, education of the young, and so on. Third, and specific to rational animals, is the inclination to know the truth about God, to live in society, and to pursue whatever knowledge pertains to these.

Now, what if we superimpose upon these three levels the lessons from a thought experiment known as the Prisoner's Dilemma, set up so that two co-conspirators interrogated in isolation have incentives to rat on each other but will get the book thrown at them if they both confess? This thought experiment counters the ethical egoism that so many take as dogma from figures like Adam Smith. For it turns out that pursuing self-interest does not necessarily lead to the common good or even to self-preservation. One thing we most need to know in order to pursue Aquinas's third precept and live together in society is what we learn from the Prisoner's Dilemma, namely that the way to preserve ourselves, and perhaps by extension the way to care for the young, is not to preserve our lives at all costs or even those of our loved ones. For those seeking to save their lives are more, not less, likely to lose them.

Admittedly, when Aquinas considered the question of killing in self-defense, he did turn to the first precept (self-preservation) to make his argument.<sup>11</sup> But if read through the Prisoner's Dilemma, this is hardly self-evident. Arguably, the natural law is far more cruciform than the natural lawyers have generally allowed. Milbank sometimes seems to recognize this. For example, he knows his J.R.R. Tolkien, in whose works the most that the many battles can accomplish is to buy time. The real plot – the key to survival, the key to history – is what the little people, the laity of hobbits, do by renouncing the ring of violent and domineering power. (As in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, so too in Yoder's *Politics of Jesus*.) More seriously, Milbank's new book contains a running critique of the post-9/11 fallacy of attempting to make ourselves more secure through a war on terrorism. I suspect, also, that as a Brit living in Virginia, down the road from the headquarters of the National Rifle Association, Milbank has noticed Americans are trying to make themselves more secure by putting handguns in their bedrooms. Statistics say it does not work.

Milbank would be more consistent to follow the lead of Stanley Hauerwas by exploring the hints that John Howard Yoder left us. The cross

runs with the grain of the universe.<sup>12</sup> To unpack this claim, which is ultimately the unexpected good news of Christ's revelation but which discloses the deepest truth of our lives, is to contest the meaning of natural law and of capital-R Realism. Mennonites have generally avoided the whole area of natural law, since nonpacifist Christians have so often used it to trump the ethical teachings of Jesus, the thoroughgoing example of his nonviolence, and his nonviolent victory over evil in the cross. Milbank opens fresh possibilities but also confirms old doubts. He too would allow the natural to trump Jesus in some ways; even so, the natural does turn out to be more contestable than Mennonite theologians have thought.

Meanwhile, Hauerwas has picked up on Yoder's tentative reopening of this question; he has begun to elaborate on just how it is that the cross runs with the grain of the universe. My appeal to Milbank is that he reconsider his rejection to Christian pacifism, picking up where Hauerwas left off in his Gifford Lectures. I would ask him to help Christian pacifists, in other words, to contest the meaning of self-preservation, care for the young, and natural law, just as he has already won back ontology, orthodoxy, and Augustinianism for peaceable practices. Would not the project of Radical Orthodoxy be stronger and more consistent if Milbank showed how cross-bearing runs – now, already, in the only time anyone has available for doing so – with the grain of an ontology of peace?

### **Appendix: A Further Exchange**

10 December 2002

Prof. John Milbank  
Religious Studies Department  
University of Virginia

Dear Prof. Milbank:

The irony – perhaps tragedy – of our blunt exchange at the Mennonite scholars event at the AAR is that of all the panelists and many of the people in the room, and as one who calls himself a “Catholic Mennonite,” I undoubtedly

agreed with far more of your arguments and points than did most. Out of a deep conviction that catholicity-from-above and catholicity-from-below need each other desperately I am actively working to create and nourish conditions that might eventually allow for Mennonites et al. to reconnect with the historic episcopacy in some unexpected way. My current work includes a project that explores whether “just policing” might not be a point of convergence between just war folks and pacifists. I am even known to let the words “authority” and “hierarchy” pass favorably across my lips.

In fact, had it not seemed important for someone on the panel to address the question of pacifism forthrightly, I would have been prepared to do a far different presentation, directed instead at Mennonites. In it I would have briefly reminded them of a century-long story that some prominent Mennonite intellectuals have been telling themselves – for purposes of apologetics and group survival – about how their Anabaptist ancestors were harbingers of religious freedom, voluntary association, social equality, participatory democracy, and other Enlightenment ideals. I would then have suggested that while this strategy has been comprehensible and in some ways appropriate, it is time for Mennonites to pay the piper, for we cannot have it both ways. If we want to take credit for the cultural extension of principles of free choice and voluntarism, we have to take responsibility for having helped make the world safe for free market capitalism, infinite advertising, the degradation of land and waters, the intrusion of marketplace mechanisms into every sphere of life, the devolution of public discourse into contests of will-for-power, and the corrosion of stable, organic, bonds of community. I would have then closed by urging Mennonites that before they get hung up on whether Milbank’s project means a return to Christendom, they had better come to terms with his critique, because they are hardly dealing with problems like freedom and voluntarism much better.

The irony I name will in fact be a tragedy if the AAR exchange has irreversibly damaged prospects for a constructive response to your opening invitation to forge links between heirs of the Radical Reformation and proponents of Radical Orthodoxy. To the end that we might savor the irony rather than suffer the tragedy I am wondering whether we might begin some qualitatively different kind of exchange. I will shortly be coming to UVA to participate in one of the workgroups of the Project on Lived Theology.

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Schedules permitting, I would be glad to arrive in time to allow us to meet. I am not proposing any particular agenda, but in order to allow you to identify additional points of contact, I am sending you two pieces of writing – my book on Augustine and the current draft of my paper on “just policing.”

Grace and peace,  
*Gerald W. Schlabach*

From: John Milbank  
Sent: December 16, 2002  
To: Gerald Schlabach  
Subject: your visit

Dear Gerald Schlabach,  
Many thanks indeed for your letter. Yes, I think your comments are absolutely right. I had not really wanted the discussion to focus on pacifism and I hoped I had headed this off by talking about the issue briefly. Just policing is the way to go – it is a species of just war theory, but certainly the way to develop this [is] now beyond the nation state and in circumstances where most war totally violates non-combatant immunity. Of course, the idea of the “non-combatant” itself has become a problem; ultimately if one condemns modern war, one condemns the modern mode of totalising politics.  
Certainly we must meet . . . .

Yours,  
*John Milbank*

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Panelists had received this and other chapters in manuscript form. The chapter in question here, “Violence: Double Passivity,” now appears in John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*, Radical Orthodoxy Series (London/New York: Routledge, 2003), 23–43.

<sup>2</sup> According to Milbank's Augustinian "ontology of peace," the universe was created for an ordered harmony of mutually giving relationships, not for endless antagonism, competition, and manipulation – whether in the guise of a Hobbesian war-of-all-against-all, the marketing of "eyeballs" gazing at video screens, or myriad practices in the capitalist marketplace.

<sup>3</sup> See *Being Reconciled*, 41.

<sup>4</sup> At this point in the presentation Milbank interrupted: "Just to chip in: I don't just say that pacifism is only a matter of averting your gaze; it's an aporia [a confusing puzzle or insoluble paradox that leads to amazement and inquiry, within which one can only maintain oneself through a rhetorical pose]. If you go on looking, can you really sustain the pacifist response?" Cf. *Being Reconciled*, 39–40, where Milbank writes that pacifism "is aporetic because both gazing and averting one's gaze from violence are intuitively complicit with its instance. Christian pacifism then, has to erect itself as a counter-intuitive doctrine." Though I must obviously concede Milbank's textual point, I would insist that whether pacifists are allegedly gazing upon or allegedly averting their gaze from violence, Milbank makes essentially the same point coming and going – that pacifists are simply passive and do nothing in the face of violence. Thus he writes on page 42: "Standing aloof, not intervening when you might – this mere gaze – is also an act: it opposes the violent person by violently leaving him to his violence and not trying to stop him in his tracks" [emphasis sic; also see p. 29]. This all-too-standard equation of pacifism with passive-ism seems strikingly ill-informed, particularly from so literate a scholar. The only way to maintain it is to make yet another tellingly Niebuhrian move, that of pulling even the active nonviolence of someone like Gandhi into the ranks of the violent by arguing that nonviolent coercion through social means is really of a piece with violent coercion. Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, reprint ed., (New York: Scribner's, 1960), 252–55.

<sup>5</sup> Note intimations to this effect in *Being Reconciled*, 29.

<sup>6</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Human Destiny*, vol. 2 of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* [1943], reprint ed., (New York: Scribner's, 1964), 68.

<sup>7</sup> Here Milbank interjected: "It's collectivist, which is not like Niebuhr. I think we can become absolutely peaceful and totally reject Niebuhr's stoicism, Machiavellianism, and all that." To this I responded: "Well, I know [that Milbank's thought as a whole is not Niebuhrian]. But this is why I'm worried that turning over the realm of the laity to the possibility of violence is going to undercut and devastate Milbank's entire project."

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Being Reconciled*, 42–43.

<sup>9</sup> Eugene McCarragher, *Christian Critics: Religion and the Impasse in Modern American Social Thought* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 90–91, 103–08.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I-II 94.2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, II-II 64.7.

<sup>12</sup> See John Howard Yoder, "Armaments and Eschatology," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 1, no. 1 (1988): 58; John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, second ed., 1972, reprint (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 246; and Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology*, Gifford Lectures delivered at the University of St. Andrews in 2001 (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001).