

Introduction to the 2002 Forum

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This year marks the fifteenth anniversary of the founding of the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre (TMTC), a research and teaching center for advanced degree studies at the Toronto School of Theology. One of the Centre's goals is to foster ecumenical dialogue, which has recently been extended to inter-faith conversations, and to engage theologians and topics from a wide range of traditions. This issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* illustrates this commitment. It contains the proceedings of two events sponsored by TMTC: a 2002 conversation with British theologian John Milbank, and a 2004 discussion of Mennonites and American Democracy. (The encounter with Milbank stands in a venerable tradition of TMTC-sponsored exchanges with distinguished theologians, including Gordon D. Kaufman, John H. Yoder, Miroslav Volf, and Stanley Hauerwas. Plans are underway for conversations with Princeton theologian Robert Jenson in Winter 2006.)

Milbank has taken the academic world by storm with his *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (1990); *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (1997), and *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (2003), the pre-published manuscript of which formed the basis of our conversation. It's not often that a new theological or philosophical movement, especially a traditionalist one, sweeps over the academy. The full impact of Milbank's thought for theology is still not clear, but he, with several colleagues, did start a theological movement which, like that of Yoder and Hauerwas, has had a powerful impact even though it goes against the mainstream.

"Radical Orthodoxy," as this movement is now known, has a number of names associated with it, primarily those of Cambridge theologians Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock, editors of the 1999 volume, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. (See the review, "The new orthodoxy?" by David S. Cunningham, in *Christian Century*, Nov. 17-24, 1999.)

Unfortunately, in my 2001 book *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics*, I did not take Milbank's thought into account. This was because I had not yet read him. I have since become acquainted with his work, and I will respond to it and to his critique of my position in a future article. My own agenda is also to recover classical themes, foremost the Christian doctrine of God as three and one (the Trinity), particularly for Mennonites. Our basic theological concerns are similar yet different. We both seek to recover classical orthodoxy in imaginative ways and to combine it with radical social ethics. But we differ on what to keep in classical thought and how to understand radical social ethics. The last chapter of my *Mennonites and Classical Theology* ("The Dynamic of the Classical Imagination"), engaging Thomas C. Oden, Wolfart Pannenberg, and Miroslav Volf, outlines my view on this issue.

Theologically, Milbank and I agree in our critique of modernity, its Enlightenment assumptions, and social-scientific forms of reductionism, and on the need to recover a theological-trinitarian basis for all of reality, including law, order, and public life. My critique of Milbank is close to that of Lois Malcolm (see her "Recovering theology's voice: Radical, orthodox," *Christian Century*, October 25, 2000): in his emphasis on "harmonious difference" (rather than primal chaos and conflict) as being at the heart of reality, and on the participation of creation in divine life, Milbank is in danger of overlooking the distinction between the divine and the human, nature and grace, reason and revelation, law and gospel, truth and beauty, and the radicality of grace in the face of human sinfulness. For me, Milbank's revisionism of classical thought is too great, leaving him more modern and postmodern than he would like to think. In his critique of all forms of universal reason and law, he goes too far in the direction of postmodern anti-foundationalism. By contrast, I seek to recover an older form of "foundationalism" — universal, mystical, or contemplative reason in the sense of the second-century apologists and the wisdom literature of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.

Ethically, I agree with Milbank that social ethics without theology is reductionistic and lacks moral power. His attempt to defend a radical, nonviolent social ethic firmly founded in the incarnation, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, and the church as a witness to divine reconciliation, is to be applauded. One wonders, however, whether his commitment to nonviolent social justice

is radical enough. Milbank conceptualizes his social ethic as coming out of the Church of England, while I argue for one consistent with the Radical Reformers of the sixteenth century. This difference in perspective led to the topic of our forum: “Radical Orthodoxy and the Radical Reformation: What is Radical about Radical Orthodoxy?”

The panel comprised five presenters, four of whom are published below, and myself as chair. Participants were sent five chapters of Milbank’s about-to-be published book, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*: “Evil: Darkness and Silence,” “Violence: Double Passivity,” “Ecclesiology: The Last of the Last,” “Politics: Socialism by Grace,” and “Culture: The Gospel of Affinity.” The presenters, all shaped by the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, offer a critique of Milbank from the perspective of a different kind of “radical orthodoxy,” one informed by a robust tradition of nonviolence going back to the sixteenth century and beyond. Milbank’s ethical radicalism is not radical enough for these thinkers, one of whom carried on a correspondence with Milbank after the event (printed below). Milbank’s rejection of violence wavers at crucial points, as becomes clear in his chapter, “Violence: Double Passivity.”

On first reading Milbank the complexity of his style and argument is overwhelming and appears to obscure what he wants to communicate. On further reading, however, one is rewarded as one enters a new world of poetic imagery. Like Martin Heidegger (with whom he profoundly disagrees), who in effect invented a new language for philosophy, Milbank occasionally rises to breathtaking poetic heights. Here is an example from *Being Reconciled*: “The Incarnation and the hypostatic descent of the Spirit inaugurated on earth a counter-polity exercising a counter-sovereignty, nourished by sovereign victimhood. . . . In heaven it [this counter-polity] is perfect, but on earth its sway is not utopian; for now we glimpse dimly its perfection within a process of reconciliation that is but fragmentally realized – like a fleeting passage of an aerial creature amongst the trees, which we are scarcely sure we have glimpsed at all. . . . It is rather that this descent [of the Son and Holy Spirit] inaugurates an altogether different possibility: it opens a narrow chink of light, allowing, albeit inchoately, a certain counter-movement of advance and of progress for the few (intensely) and the many (dispersedly) towards the source of this light.”