What Should Mennonites and Milbank Learn from Each Other?

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Introduction

The movement known as "Radical Orthodoxy" springs from a recognition that much contemporary theological reflection, let alone first-order Christian speech, is theologically vacuous. In particular, it suggests that theology ceases to be theological when it becomes an attempt to make the world safe for theology and theology safe for the world. In doing so, it seeks to diagnose the "false humility" of such an approach as another violent attempt to identify an appropriate realm for the possession of power in a secular landscape of barren positivities. By contrast, Radical Orthodoxy presents itself as an audacious attempt to reclaim the world for theology and theology for the world. Breaking out of the narrow confines theology imposes on itself in its characteristically modern moments, it seeks to recover the entire world as the appropriate subject of theological investigation, and thus to articulate a new vision of hope for the world. The scope of its vision is daunting, as it seeks a comprehensiveness – "a commitment to all or nothing"[1] – that passes beyond the universal, which it regards as but a moment inscribed within a larger dance with particularity, a duality meaningful only against the background of an economy of scarcity, mastery, and control. As it seeks to "read the signs of the times . . . in terms of the grammar of the Christian faith," Radical Orthodoxy is unashamedly bold and daringly ambitious.[2]

As Radical Orthodoxy flies in the face of liberal "safe-making" techniques, this is said to be a decidedly risky endeavor, because it refuses to anchor theology to a self-legitimating ground of some sort. But this is not a "reactive" riskiness that assumes conflict to be ontologically basic, and that seeks mastery and control in order to gain security in a dangerous situation always threatening to overwhelm us. Rather, the riskiness is understood on grounds internal to theology itself. It follows from the logic of creation *ex nihilo* that theology, to be theology, must unhook itself from any external non-theological vehicle designed to guarantee its successful arrival upon some

pre-given scene. The theology of Radical Orthodoxy radically refuses all positivities, all strategic and regulative reductions, whether rationalistic or fideistic, ecclesial or psychological. Any attempt to ground theology on a neutral footing is the expression of a possessive, territorial drive to secure power that contradicts the gratuitous exchange of gift-giving and receiving which is the logic of creation. This attempt to refuse to tame or domesticate the essential contingency and riskiness of theology is what makes the work of Radical Orthodoxy bold. Its purported radicalism is perhaps best seen in how it brings comprehensiveness and riskiness together as a master discourse that is at the same time a discourse of non-mastery.[3]

How, then, might Mennonites engage this project? Boldness and audacity are not terms usually associated with Mennonites. Yet Mennonite theology also grows out of a vision of theological radicalism that resists the temptation to absolutize itself in a given conception of space and/or time. In the following discussion I shall reflect on what Mennonite theology – if there is such a thing – could learn from Radical Orthodoxy. I shall suggest that Milbank can be used to identify certain problematic tendencies associated with contemporary Mennonite theology, but I shall also identify a few critical counter-gifts to be offered in return. Not only is it instructive to read Radical Reformation against the background of Radical Orthodoxy, it is equally important to read the latter against the background of the former. The conception of theological radicalism claimed by both positions is best understood only when they properly receive and return each other's critical gifts.

Milbank's Lessons for Mennonites

Perhaps the most striking feature of contemporary Mennonite theology, when read against the background of Radical Orthodoxy, is its almost systematic evasion of theology. While defenders of Radical Orthodoxy, along with Stanley Hauerwas and others, have warned against the dangers of distinguishing between theology and ethics, so-called Mennonite theology often appears based largely on a choice of ethics over against theology. It is reduced to an ethic of pacifism, appropriately described in the terms John Rawls used to summarize his theory of justice, namely that it is political and not metaphysical. The category of peace is abstracted from its larger theological home, idealized, and turned into a criterion for adjudicating all subsequent reflection, theological

or otherwise. This does to peace what Scotus and the late medieval nominalists, on the Radical Orthodoxy reading, did in elevating "being" to a higher status than God. Mennonite theological reflection is developed as though it is secondary to a prior non-theological concept – in this case, peace – and therefore ceases to be theological in any meaningful sense. Peace is reinterpreted as a univocal concept, as Mennonites seemingly latch on to any reference to peace, with little or no apparent appreciation of how its meaning differs markedly from one variety of pacifism to another. From this perspective, Mennonite theology could be said to go wrong when it focuses too exclusively on the question of peace and violence; in doing so its discourse on peace is evacuated of any theological content.[4]

At the same time, one often gets the impression that peace is reified and treated statically, as a possession that Mennonites have privileged access to and are charged to distribute effectively to others. In Milbank's terms, this is to understand peace as if it exists in an economy of scarcity and is "in short supply," so that peace becomes interpreted as a more secure investment or insurance against a prior danger.[5] This is to miss the sense in which Christian theology presumes an economy of generous plentitude and excess. To assert the ontological priority of peace is to see it as an excessive and freely given charitable donation. Christians are thereby called to "cease to be self-sufficient in the face of scarcity," and instead to embody an exchange of gift-giving and receiving that flows out of the excessively gracious self-giving of God. Mennonite theology often seems to operate under a conception of peacemaking that names a process of bringing order to what is disordered in *this world*, whereas for Milbank peace names a fundamentally different *ontology*. Christian worship, and particularly the forgiveness of sins, thus constitutes the interruption of a new order – simultaneously a counter-politics and counter-ontology – into the world of the secular.[6] Most important, this means that a theological conception of peace is not reactive. It is not primarily a response to a prior situation of conflict, and so we should not speak as if violence is something to be "overcome." Instead of viewing peace as a reaction to a pre-existing situation of violence, Milbank reads the story of creation *ex nihilo* as an alternative vision of the world that hinges on the idea of originary peace. Peace is thus ontologically prior to violence. It cannot be secured, and thus cannot flourish in a capitalist economy of self-interest, debt, scarcity, and

contract. Rather, it is at home in an economy of charitable donation and thus exists only as unnecessarily given and received. To participate in Christian worship is to be inscribed within a logic of gift-giving and receiving, and within a conception of generosity seen as participation in the gracious self-given excessive reality of God.

Closely related to this, Mennonite theology might also learn much from Radical Orthodoxy's re-reading of the so-called "tradition." Milbank notes that "Radical Orthodoxy, if catholic, is not a specifically Roman Catholic theology; although it can be espoused by Roman Catholics, it can equally be espoused by those who are formally 'protestant', yet whose theory and practice essentially accords with the catholic vision of the Patristic period through to the high Middle Ages."[7] Mennonite theology too often skips directly from the New Testament to the sixteenth century. Or when it does engage the catholic vision, it often categorically rejects it as involving no more than an elaborate legitimation of violence. We should recall that patristic and medieval sources are part of our tradition – if there is such a thing – too. We might further learn from Milbank and others that we do not have to read patristic and medieval theology as it has been read against the background of the Reformation (or, perhaps more accurately, against the background of the Enlightenment invention of the distinction between natural and revealed religion, or between reason and tradition). In particular, it is not to be read in a way that projects onto it a series of dualities, such as faith and reason, nature and grace, or the spiritual and the political. Milbank suggests that before the Enlightenment, faith and reason were not the names of essentially distinct realms but were rather differing degrees of intensity of participation in the mind of God.[8]

In a similar vein, Milbank shows that the common interpretation that attributes to Aquinas a two-tiered account of nature and grace as distinct stages must give way to an appreciation of the sense in which Aquinas saw nature as always already graced. More generally, the medieval metaphysics of participation and analogy might help resist the tendency to overemphasize peace so that it becomes non-theological, an object or possession to be secured and distributed. Discipleship could then be seen not as a simple copying of Jesus' acts but as a participation in the very body of Christ itself that is simultaneously metaphysical and political.

The third lesson Mennonites might learn draws on Catherine Pickstock's suggestion that Radical Orthodoxy is not to be regarded as "a discrete edifice which purports to be a stronghold" but as "a hermeneutic disposition and a style of metaphysical vision; and it is not so much a 'thing' or 'place' as a task."[9] It is a hermeneutic of doxological dispossession or theological deterritorialization, resisting any strategy of "spatialization" that might reduce the gifts of knowledge understood as divine illumination to an objectified "given" that must be secured and protected through a policing of borders.[10] Similarly, it is equally important to view the Radical Reformation as naming a hermeneutic or style rather than a distinct entity or thing. This point has already been made by John Howard Yoder, but its significance is often missed. In particular, Yoder suggests that Radical Reformation names a certain habit of thinking, a kind of dialogical vulnerability, which cultivates a "constant potential for reformation and in the more dramatic situations a readiness for the reformation even to be 'radical'."[11] This is equally a style of metaphysical vision perhaps best described as apocalyptic, as Stanley Hauerwas seeks to show by building on Yoder's claim that "people who bear crosses are working with the grain of the universe."[12] Both Radical Orthodoxy and Radical Reformation name a theological style that refuses the rhetoric of spatialization or self-absolutization and ceases to think of theology as an entity or territory to be policed and secured by boundaries. One implication of this is that it becomes rather odd to speak in terms of such a thing as Mennonite theology at all. The characteristic styles of Radical Orthodoxy and Radical Reformation challenge the assumption that Mennonite theological distinctiveness rests on concentric habits of thinking, or on an underlying territorial conception of theological enquiry.[13]

Mennonites' Lessons for Milbank

I now want to identify three critical counter-gifts Mennonites might give to Milbank. Each could be interpreted to suggest that Mennonites are equipped to learn from him in ways surpassing what he appears to have learned from himself. The first centers on the voice of the theologian. Despite his call to recast theology as an ecclesial practice, Milbank privileges the theologian's voice in a way that implies a residual commitment to specialization and professionalism, and to a kind of reactive heroism he otherwise calls question as an instance of a secular economy of security and possession.

Let me develop this claim by contrasting two statements by Milbank. First, in *Theology and Social Theory* he writes that "in a rhetorical perspective, the story of the development of the tradition – for example, in the case of Christianity, a story of preachings, journeyings, miracles, martyrdoms, intrigues, sin and warfare – really *is* the argument for the tradition."[14] Second, in the opening lines of *The Word Made Strange*, Milbank says "today, theology is tragically too important," so that "the theologian feels almost that the entire ecclesial task falls on his own head: in the meagre mode of reflective words he must seek to imagine what a true practical repetition would look like."[15] This second claim strikingly cancels out the insights of the first. It gives the impression that theology is brought *to* Christian practice and not found anywhere *within* it. For all his talk of ecclesial practice, Milbank implies that theology is an intellectual exercise overseen by the theologian, that authority is not internal to practices themselves but imposed externally from the perspective of an authority figure who inhabits a theoretical space transcending the practices.

By contrast, the Radical Reformation attempts to avoid such a privileging of the voice of the theologian or any such turn to theory, emphasizing instead the many members making up the body of Christ. To quote from Yoder again, "the agent of moral discernment in the doxological community is not a theologian, a bishop, or a pollster, but the Holy Spirit, discerned as the unity of the entire body."[16]

This conception of the unified body turns crucially on the practice of patience. Here is a second lesson Milbank might learn from Mennonites: a vision of the church as a counter-epistemology that is not preoccupied with epistemic justification, but one that practices the epistemological virtue of patience required for genuine engagement with the other in a process of open conversation, often referred to as the Rule of Paul. It is a mode of knowledge slowly proceeding in fragments and ad hoc alliances through the hard work of a conversation whose parameters cannot be defined in advance of actual encounter. It seeks to hear all the relevant voices, and resists the violent tendency to silence anyone by the way the debate is constructed beforehand. It is an epistemology that resists closure, refusing the lie of the total perspective and the search for a purified idiom of speech, and recognizing that language about God is not limited to our current vocabularies. Moreover, it encourages the active pursuit of dialogical conflict in its willingness to engage in self-

criticism. In short, it is a conception of theological enquiry that lingers timefully and patiently as a way of resisting the temptation to self-absolutization.

Milbank sometimes implies something similar, as when he writes that "consensus happens, unpredictably, through the blending of differences, and by means of these differences, not despite them."[17] Yet his work equally exhibits a rhetorical preoccupation with speed of delivery that suggests the overcoming of patience. This is perhaps best exemplified in how he differentiates a Christian counter-ontology of peace from a secular ontology of violence by means of sharp, almost over-general contrasts between their competing logics. It is also exemplified in his tendency to trace everything to the one basic mistake of the Scotist elevation of "being" over God. I do not suggest that Milbank fails to identify theologically problematic claims. But it is important to see how the development of his interpretation as a kind of unrestrained rhetorical hypernarrative reveals a preoccupation with speed, efficiency, and possessive mastery that he otherwise calls into question. It is also possible to read his understanding of pedagogically justified violence from the same standpoint. Milbank defends the possible necessity of recourse to violence in "bringing a defaulter to his senses" rather than risking this will not happen in ongoing, timeful "open conversation." The value of Mennonite theology – if there is such a thing – is that it proceeds patiently, entering vulnerably into the world of another rather than employing an accelerated, possessive hermeneutics of mastery and control.

These lessons might be combined to suggest there is a lingering commitment to instrumental causality in Milbank's work, despite his rejection of instrumentalism as a defining feature of secular reason. This appeal to instrumental causality tends to appear precisely at those moments where Milbank argues that an ontology of peace does not entail a commitment to pacifism. For example, he writes that "the *purpose* of ecclesial coercion is peace" and says that violence can be justified in so far as it "contribute[s] to the *final goal* of peace."[18] Such claims imply that pedagogic coercion is justified because it is effective in bringing about an independently specifiable end. Accordingly, there is a sense in which Milbank's rhetoric underwrites a securing of ecclesial agreement or consensus that conflicts with his account of consensus arising through an exchange of difference. At these crucial points in his argument Milbank is strikingly rather silent about the activity of

God. As noted above, much of his theology depends on an account of *poesis* as human participation in God's creative activity. Yet when discussing the possibility of ecclesial violence and the "cultivation" of peace, it sounds as if the "fate of the counter-kingdom" falls squarely on human shoulders.

Milbank argues that "one way to secure peace is to draw boundaries around 'the same', and exclude 'the other'; to promote some practices and disallow alternatives. Most polities and most religions characteristically do this. But the Church has misunderstood itself when it does likewise."[19] In this he is exactly right. However, his discussion of pedagogical coercion and other forms of "legitimate violence" sounds too much like just this kind of ecclesial failure. A commitment to nonviolence need not be to "fetishize freedom," as Milbank appropriately worries it might.[20] Rather, it is best read as an attempt to take more seriously the possibility of participating, however imperfectly, in God's gratuitous economy of peaceable plentitude and excess.[21] It is one thing to recognize retrospectively that we are always already implicated in some form of violence, and to struggle collectively to disentangle ourselves – or, rather, open ourselves to the possibility of being disentangled – from it. It is quite another thing to justify prospectively the forward-looking enactment of violence as bringing about a certain desired effect, even one as important as the truth about God. For the most profound truth about God – and that which Christian nonviolence most significantly turns on – is that God is not dependent on us to ensure his continued survival. So the Mennonite commitment to nonviolence might serve as a third lesson, even though it has so often been interpreted in a manifestly untheological way. It represents an ongoing commitment to just the kind of ecclesial practice that could itself be seen as the most profound argument for the tradition, an argument that is significant precisely in not seeking to secure itself by invoking the heroic voice of the theologian.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I return to the question of comprehensiveness and riskiness. Mennonites have often taken themselves to be necessarily at odds with boldness and comprehensiveness. But we have misunderstood ourselves when we have done so. On the contrary, it might be suggested that a Mennonite commitment to practising nonviolence exemplifies an even more thoroughgoing

commitment to the comprehensiveness of "all or nothing," since it does not have the safety net of an appeal to coercive violence when consensus does not happen through the unpredictable blending of differences. Similarly, it more appropriately embodies the essential riskiness of a theological vision. Its appreciation of riskiness can be seen in its refusal to make Christianity necessary, and its corresponding embodiment of an ethos of dialogical vulnerability that cultivates a readiness for Radical Reformation.

Thus, in a sense, Radical Reformation turns out to display just the kind of radicalism called for by Radical Orthodoxy, sometimes in a way suggesting it has the resources to more adequately learn the lessons of Radical Orthodoxy than do the latter's own defenders. But the apparent sense of accomplishment captured in such claims comes at a price. For such a reading of the Radical Reformation can only be sustained when it stops focusing too exclusively on violence and peace, and understands peace in more substantively theological and ontological terms. This, among other things, calls into question the very idea of a distinctive Mennonite theology to be articulated and defended in the first place.

Notes

[1] John Milbank, "Violence: Double Passivity," unpublished manuscript, 29.

[2] Graham Ward, "Radical Orthodoxy and/as Cultural Politics," In *Radical Orthodoxy? A Catholic Enquiry*, ed. Laurence Paul Hemming (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 103.

[3] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 6.

[4] See John Milbank, "Violence: Double Passivity," 3; and John Howard Yoder, "Why Ecclesiology is Social Ethics," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiologial and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael Cartwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 109.

[5] John Milbank, "Can Morality Be Christian?" in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (London: Blackwell, 1997), 224-25.

[6] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 411.

[7] Milbank, "The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy," 35.

[8] See John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2001), 19-59.

[9] Catherine Pickstock, "Radical Orthodoxy and the Mediations of Time," in *Radical Orthodoxy? A Catholic Enquiry*, 63.

[10] Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (London: Blackwell, 1998), 62-64.

[11] Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 5.
[12] Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001). The Yoder passage is from "Armaments and Eschatology," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 1:1 (1988): 58. See also John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 246; and, programmatically, "To Serve Our God and to Rule the World," in *The Royal Priesthood*, 128-40.
[13] I have developed this argument at greater length with respect to the work of J. Denny Weaver in a review essay of his *Anabaptist Theology in the Face of Postmodernity: A Proposal for the Third Millennium* in *Preservings: Journal of the Steinbach Historical Society* No. 18 (June, 2001): 145-48.
[14] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 347 (Milbank's emphasis).
[15] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 1. I thank Peter Dula for drawing the significance of this to my attention.
[16] Yoder, "To Serve Our God and to Rule the World," 139.
[17] John Milbank, "The Name of Jesus," in *The Word Made Strange*, 155.
[18] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 418 (emphasis added).
[19] Milbank, "'Postmodern Critical Augustinianism': A Short *Summa* in Forty-two Responses to Unasked Questions," *Modern Theology* 7.3 (1991): 225-37 at 229.
[20] Milbank, "Violence: Double Passivity," 27.