Milbank, Theology, and Stories of the Marginalized

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I want to begin by expressing appreciation for this forum and its intentional design of creating a space for a conversation taking us into uncertain and even unknown places. The opportunity to engage with one of the important figures of Radical Orthodoxy is also a good thing, even if some of my feelings about its mode of reflection are less than positive!

 I find much of what Radical Orthodoxy has to offer quite appealing. Concerns for worship and liturgy (which we understand as the performance of our faith) are clearly given prominence when John Milbank writes, "The Christian God can no longer be thought of as a God first seen, but rather as a God first prayed to, first imagined, first inspiring certain actions, first put into words, and always thought about, objectified, even if this objectification is recognized as inevitably inadequate."[1] Moreover, I share Milbank's concern that Christian theology find an effective way to assert itself in the vast multiplex of discourse, because "If theology no longer seeks to position, qualify, or criticize other discourses, then it is inevitable that these discourses will position theology."[2] At the same time, this approach does not cut theology off from other disciplines but rather seeks engagement without allowing discussion partners to marginalize *theological* discourse.

 However, the kind of theology and discourse that I stand behind is not very similar to that of Milbank and/or Radical Orthodoxy. I am in a setting where black liberation theology and womanist theology are actively shaping discourse. At this meeting of the American Academy of Religion alone, two sessions are dedicated to responding to the challenges James Cone issued to white theologians in his plenary address to the Academy last year in Denver. Likewise, two panel presentations here in Toronto celebrate the work of Delores Williams, especially her landmark text *Sisters in the Wilderness*.[3] Their theological work comes from their common experiences of being cast out, cast down, and disenfranchised, and ultimately knowing this was not God's idea of justice. These theological systems, along with feminist theology, are based on the black freedom movement, the women's liberation movement, and the discourse of womanism.[4] The need for liberation is real (by "liberation"

I mean a release from the bondage of white and male supremacy). The need for the elevation of additional views, or at least for equalizing some of *these* modes of theological discourse, is also real.

The three modes of theologizing to which I have referred argue that part of the theologian's task is to bring the historical into a new focus, so special care and attention is given to history because it has so often been a tool of dominators. Just like we Mennonites lament that history books are written by winners who justify their actions based on a belief in the redemptive power of violence and acts of war, so to do African Americans lament that the history of blacks has been written by whites. This means that recovering the oral traditions of slave communities and slave narratives is important, because they are a vital source for theological reflection. The story of black/slave Christianity is just as normative for black liberation theology as tradition that has been interpreted by white, Western Christians.

History is a powerful tool. I remember my eighth grade history teacher telling our class that he had recently read a persuasive account of slavery in the United States and now believed slavery was not as bad as people made it out to be. Slaves were property, and why would someone misuse and mistreat their property? As the only student of color with African ancestry in the class, I was quite certain there was something very wrong with what my teacher was saying.[5] I had always understood slavery as a bad and evil thing, and the Emancipation Proclamation and the Southern Freedom Movement as important events in my life because without them I would not be alive. The way we portray history in our theology must be seriously considered by all of us engaging in the theological enterprise.

Black theologians have written extensively on how slaveholder Christianity dehumanized enslaved African peoples until it was brought to the system's attention that Christianity could also be used as a tool to keep slaves in check. But there was a problem: How would white Christians re-humanize blacks so that they could invite them to receive the love of Christ? Blacks needed to be elevated to something above animals. Enter the curse of Ham. The curse of Ham became the mark of dark or darker skin, and thus explained why blacks were both lower than whites and in need of salvation. Moreover, whites unabashedly published volumes like *Selections of the Holy Bible for Negro Slaves,* but there was no Exodus story in those selections, no story of

Ruth and Naomi, lest slaves encounter the linchpins whose removal from slaveholder Christianity would bring white Christianity tumbling down.[6]

I believe with Cone and others that theology comes from our working out the deep contradictions between what we have experienced in the world and what dominant theological systems urge us to do with those contradictions. Theology is a question of where we feel tension, where what we see just does not sit right with us when we compare those experiences or facts with what Jesus points to as he proclaims the reign of God in the gospels.

In the following commentary, I will respond to the first chapter of the Milbank manuscript we received. This chapter is concerned with the theme of evil. It opens by challenging those who would say that evil is not privative of being. Milbank writes, "The main objection of the postmodern Kantian to privation theory" is that "it provides an ontological excuse for evil which diminishes the responsibility of freedom." Surely this kind of evil must possess the force or quality of being. This becomes "radical evil," where evil is understood "as a pure act of perversity without ground."[7] Milbank traces various developments of this position – which he calls "postmodern Kantian" – relating to both the theory and practice of evil, with the ultimate goals of offering "a further exposition and defence of the view of evil as privation and banality" and showing that the "modern, positive theory of evil *is* in a measure responsible for the modern actuality of evil."[8] In opposition to postmodern Kantians, he uses Pauline and Augustinian understandings to argue for viewing evil as privative.

He dedicates part of his discussion to more fully describing the modern theory of evil as positive – the radical evil that has power and will and desire for the systematic extermination of entire groups of people. As he listed examples where US liberal democracy is implicated in perpetuating this kind of evil, I was disappointed that slavery, Jim Crow, and lynching failed to make the list alongside colonialist dealings in our foreign policy, both in places from the Philippines to Hiroshima and in more contemporary conflicts including Vietnam, the Gulf War, and Afghanistan. Then I became frustrated when he observed that, unlike the enslavement and forced labor of the *Shoah*, "previous slave economies still preserved some sense of the human status of slaves."[9] What really took the cake for me were his comments in the concluding portion of the chapter.

After dialoging with Kantians and radical evil – making the case for privative and banal evil – Milbank extends the argument to discuss accidental

evil. This is where his arguments fall apart beyond repair. Let me read directly from his manuscript:

> One can extend [Hannah] Arendt's theory of banality by arguing that the quasi-Satanism of the perpetrators of State horror is usually prepared by an incremental piling up of small deficient preferences which gradually and "accidentally" [accumulate] (… However, by this they mean that pursuit of a too limited good 'accidentally' causes the lack of good that should ensue. This is an odd sort of accidentality, since it really brings nothing about, and involves not merely a non-intended consequence, but also an overlooked one.)

> To give an example of this "accidental" process: in the seventeenth century English colony of Virginia, female servants proved at once unruly and over-dependent on their masters in circumstances of instability and great reliance upon women's labour. It proved harder and harder to grant them relative independence after their apprenticeships, and also harder and harder to ensure the legitimacy of their offspring. Gradually, their servitude drifted into slavery, and inheritance for slaves was directed for obvious reasons of convenience through the female line. . . . Soon, with the expansion of the African trade, there were more black female servants and slaves than white. . . . Soon after that, there was a preponderance of black female slaves . . . and then their children, female and male, were all members of a black slave class. In 1662, all this was finally codified in law. Although it is true that a slave trade and embryonic racist ideologies – including the idea that black women were more suited to outdoor labour – preceded these developments, the legal confirmation of *de facto* slavery and the exclusive linking of a slave class to race (initially defined, though, more in terms of religion than of colour), nevertheless came about through the incremental effect of a series of petty puritanical and disciplinary approaches to a very real chaos, rather than from any fully-fledged ideological programme. The later only emerged in the wake of sedimented events.

> Such a stress upon the "accidental" factor in this case alerts us to the truth that a full-fledged slave economy was less a diabolical aberration in the recent history of the west, than something that many typical features of western modernity (disciplinary puritanism, enhanced patriarchalism, neo-republican dreams) could gradually engender in certain extreme circumstances.

Troubled by this reading, I discovered from my modest collection of texts on women's history that Milbank's reading of colonial Virginia does not fit with that of reputed scholars, namely Sara Evans, Darlene Clark Hine, and Kathleen Thompson. Evans notes that part of indentured servitude's insidiousness was the widespread belief that unless properly exercised, women's reproductive organs would wander around in their bodies, making them prone to bouts of hysteria. Thus, it was a master's obligation to ensure that women were being impregnated, or at least that the attempt be made to impregnate them, so that such emotional outbursts would be avoided.[10]

As for Milbank's assertion that defining slavery had little to do with race, I offer the following from *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America:*

> Defining slavery was not an easy task in a democracy, or rather, a group of democracies. . . . Essentially, slavery, as a legal category, defined certain people as part people and part property. In the half century or so following 1641, hundreds of laws would be passed clarifying the position of these "part-people" socially and economically. But the most significant laws were those that defined exactly who could be classified as a slave and who could not. The white men in power decided right from the start that white people – with a very few exceptions – could not be enslaved. The could enter indentured servitude, which we have seen was a form of slavery, but they could not legally be slaves.[11]

Clark Hine and Thompson continue,

> [T]he situation was soon complicated. Children were born who were black *and* white. Or black and Native American. This was a completely natural result of the living conditions at the time, as enslaved Africans and indentured white servants often worked

side by side. They relaxed together, rebelled against their situation together, became friends, and created families. This mixed population was problematic to the lawmakers. Could they be enslaved? Did their white blood protect them or did their black blood condemn them?

It took a while to answer these questions, and different colonies answered them differently for a time. Then, in 1662 Virginia, the fateful and fatal law was passed. In most places, at most times in history, children have been blessed or cursed by the social positions of their fathers. The son of a gentleman was a gentleman. The son of a serf was a serf. The mother's status, while it might be a spot of tarnish on the family crest or a source of curdled pride to her déclassé children, was essentially irrelevant. But in the early 1660s – beginning with 1662 Virginia law – the American colonies without exceptions passed laws stating that "all children borne in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother."[12]

Finally, my own reading and others' readings of the text Milbank cites, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Race, Gender, and Power in Colonial Virginia,* does not affirm his summation of author Kathleen Brown's argument. The following is illustrative of reviews I consulted and captures my sense of what this text offers in terms of a radical reading of history:

[Kathleen] Brown has an extraordinary complex view of culture and process of cultural change. . . . the colonial elite ultimately managed to deny the historical process that created Virginia by insisting that constructions of race and gender reflected an eternal natural order. For historians to separate the political lives of Virginia's male elite from a concept of masculinity rooted in race and gender, Brown maintains, is to be complicit in their own scheme of dominance: "Without a more organic view of the relationships between gender, race, and power, we cannot begin to grapple with the legacy of colonial Virginia for the new nation, the antebellum South, and our own time" (p. 373).[13]

Milbank correctly reads Brown's concern that gender and race be seen as part of a complex of factors at work in U.S. history. He does not correctly read her concern about the larger patriarchal and socio-religious ideologies at work. There is, and was, *nothing* accidental about any of that process.

Why does this matter? It matters because whenever women's realities – or those of any marginalized group – are misrepresented, we must ask why this is happening. I am not accusing Milbank of intentional misrepresentation; I am simply admonishing him for not knowing his *herstory*. My concern has deep theological relevance. Now, you may think I am refusing to see the forest for the trees, and you would be correct, although to be precise, I am actually unable to see the forest for a *particular* tree: the one from which Eve plucked the pomegranate. By absenting Eve and thus marginalizing women's experience from the story of the Fall, Milbank effectively misses an important theological anthropological theme. Ivone Gebara puts it well:

> I am persuaded that, if we are to probe into the question of evil, we have to develop a new anthropology. . . . I propose some principles of anthropology that are different from those developed in Christian tradition and are bound to new hermeneutical tools. Some rather complicated questions can be raised about the philosophical anthropology that supports Christian theology in general. . . . Evil, as far as men are concerned, has always been viewed as some "thing" that happens, that takes hold of human beings, surrounds them, attracts them. Furthermore, for men, evil is not inherent to human nature; rather, it results from freedom – limited freedom, of course, but free will all the same. In the case of women, however, certain Scripture texts and a number of theological commentaries by church fathers state that female beings are more evil than male beings.[14]

To characterize the plight of women – black, white, and in between – in colonial America (and thus beyond) as the consequential product of a series of *incidental* moments, created by attempts to control a chaotic context, does not deal with the fallacies of the Christian theological tradition's understanding of women as evil and therefore subjected to social and theological controls. When we theologians fail to capture the nuances of the

stories of the marginalized that lead to a misreading of those on-going realities, our theologizing is not radical in any sense of the word.

Notes

[1] John Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A Short *Summa* in Forty-two Responses to Unasked Questions," in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward, *Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1997; reprint, 1998), 267.

[2] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 3; Debra Dean Murphy, "Power, Politics, and Difference: A Feminist Response to John Milbank," *Modern Theology* 10. 2 (1994): 132.

[3] Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

[4] This is a mode of theologizing based on a concept of women's identity articulated by Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1983).

[5] Interestingly, the teacher would often remind us that his grandmother was a full-blooded Tuscarora Indian. One would have thought this heritage would dispose him to being more judicious in what he told his students about American history.

[6] Sylvester Johnson's dissertation, "The 'Children of Ham' in America" Divine Identity and the Hamitic Idea in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity" (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, 2002), is an extensive discussion of how both blacks and whites worked with this myth, and it adeptly explores the complex of theological ideology and ontology surrounding blackness in America.

[7] Milbank manuscript, "Chapter 1: Evil: Darkness and Silence," 1-2.

[8] *Ibid*., 6-7, emphasis Milbank's.

[9] *Ibid*., 8.

[10] Sara Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 22-23.

[11] Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 15.

[12] *Ibid*.

[13] Theda Perdue, review of *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* by Kathleen Brown, in *American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (1999): 897.

[14] Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation*, trans. Ann Patrick Ware (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 4.