

## **The Monstrosity of Protestantism**

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John Milbank was introduced to a broad American academic audience in a high-profile article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* written by Jeff Sharlet in June 2000.<sup>1</sup> Introduced as the “earthly creator of Radical Orthodoxy,” it was here in this article where it was speculated that Milbank’s movement “may well become the biggest development in theology since Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door.” It was a year later that *Time Magazine* declared Milbank a *bona fide* “academic star” and identified him as one of its seven innovative thinkers for the new millennium, crediting him especially with clearing “a way for theologians to reclaim their place at the academic table, ending decades, if not centuries, of marginalization.”<sup>2</sup>

Of course, those who know Milbank and his work should not be surprised at these exalted claims for his place in the history of Christian theology. For instance, in a formal session of the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, I once heard him declare, “Martin Luther says unto you, justification by faith. But I say unto you, there is no justice without authority.” With this sudden adoption of King James’ English and an evocation of the familiar rhetorical structuring of Jesus’ own Sermon on the Mount, it seems Milbank has taken the mantle of Martin Luther to heart.

I begin with this not to traffic in academic gossip, but because I believe this linking of Milbank with Luther goes to the heart of Milbank’s – and by extension, Radical Orthodoxy’s – evolving theological project as revealed in this impressive, and at times (as is always the case with Milbank and less so with Žižek) imperious dialogue on the “monstrosity of Christ,” a genuinely theological dialogue that hinges on two differing Christological interpretations which give way to two opposing versions of materialism. Put briefly, I might sum up what I mean by this link between Milbank and Luther with the reference points of “history” and the “Protestant Reformation.” And my thesis is as follows: By his counter-narrative trope of constructing an alternative history to modernity, Milbank has defined the school of Radical Orthodoxy according to the principle task of undoing the Protestant Reformation. So, if in fact Radical Orthodoxy proves to be the biggest development in theology since Martin Luther (a proposition of which I am highly skeptical, by the way), and if in fact Milbank has his way, we might pretend as if the social, cultural, political, and religious torment that was the protestant reformation never happened at all, and by extension, the Christian church might once again revel in the glory of Christendom.

If this thesis strikes some as exaggerated, at the very least I must cite Milbank’s own stated goal of converting Žižek from the “Whiggish Protestant” that Milbank reads him to be into the Catholic that he might become. As the subtitle to this book indicates, the debate between

Milbank and Žižek is on whether a paradoxical or dialectical perspective is best.<sup>3</sup> As Milbank tells it, it is Žižek's endorsement of a Hegelian dialectic that makes him all-too-Protestant; and further, "it is the dialectical perspective itself which engenders the nihilistic version of Christian universalism" (112). So, if by Milbank's telling, dialectics are a "symptom" of an essentially modern, Protestant metanarrative, and if dialectics engender nihilism, then wouldn't we be correct to conclude that Protestantism is a form of nihilism? We might read Milbank's rejoinder to Žižek, therefore, not only as an ironic reading of Žižek – an effort to out-Žižek Žižek, if you will – but also an effort to save Žižek from himself, to cure him of his ill-informed and superficial appropriation of Protestantism. As Milbank announces, "My case is that there is a different, latent Žižek: a Žižek who does not see Chesterton as sub-Hegel, but Hegel as sub-Chesterton. A Žižek therefore who has remained with paradox, or rather moved back into paradox from dialectics. And this remaining would be sufficient to engender a Catholic Žižek, a Žižek able fully to endorse a transcendent God, in whom creatures analogically participate" (113).

Milbank's repudiation of Protestantism is part and parcel of his rejection of history. As Milbank explains:

The defense of paradox has to be conjoined with a refusal of the Protestant metanarrative in which Žižek is in thrall. In fact, at both the theoretical and the historical level the issue of Catholic versus Protestant is far more fundamental than the question of theism versus atheism – the latter is merely a subplot of the former conflict, which is today notably resurfacing. The key illusion of the Protestant metanarrative is that the mode in which modernity has occurred, and the stages that it has gone through, are the necessary and only possible modes and stages. (114)

This extended quote needs considerable unpacking. First, note how Milbank speaks of the intra-religious relations between Catholic and Protestant as a conflict in which Catholics are pitted against Protestants. Second, note the sly association of modern history with an illusion, as if our history is something from which we can pick and choose, or repudiate and reverse. I will take each one of these observations up in turn.

First, concerning the intimation of violence suggested by this quote, this has long been a source of concern for critics of Radical Orthodoxy. Going back to Sharlet's article from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that introduced Milbank to the American academic world, he was correct to point out that "of the various strains of postliberal theology, Radical Orthodoxy is by far the most political."<sup>4</sup> This is partly due to the Christian socialist background in Britain, but even more Radical Orthodoxy could be seen as a harbinger of the recent political turn in philosophical and theological circles. Certainly since the September 11 attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., there has been a consuming interest in the relation between religion and politics and the specter of religious violence. This geopolitical reality reinforces electioneering strategies on the U.S. domestic front as George W. Bush was twice elected as

president in great part due to the effective political mobilization of the religious right. Also, this so-called political turn reflects a generational change within the world of continental philosophy as leading French post-structuralist thinkers whose post-political identities were forged during the student protests of May 1968 have given way to outspoken critics who have been willing to venture forth with their own explicit political programs. This new generation of continental philosophical thinkers led by Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, and Antonio Negri have been most critical of how easily classical modern liberalism mutates, or can be conflated with, globalizing neo-liberalism; and in a related fashion, how difficultly postmodern deconstruction can translate itself into a politics of collective action. As one scholar puts it, “The tragedy of the politics of subjectivity (at least the Derridean version thereof) is that it has no way of inserting the subject into the domain of the actually political.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, this new generation of thinkers is offering up an alternative postmodernism that is deliberately post-liberal more so than post-structural, and as such, a repoliticization of cultural theory.

Both Žižek and Milbank belong within this general trajectory of the political turn, a point made at the very outset of this volume in Creston Davis’s masterful introduction that sets the stage for the respective debate between these two towering figures: “In the pages that follow,” Davis writes, “the orthodox Christian theologian John Milbank and the militant Marxist Slavoj Žižek engage one another around this revolutionary political problematic: How can the theological and the material unite to fund resistance to capitalist nihilism” (4). But if it is a revolutionary political problematic that Milbank shares in common with Žižek and which distinguishes Radical Orthodoxy from the other variants of post-liberal theology, then it is incumbent to ask, as Sharlet did in his article for the *Chronicle* a decade ago, what exactly does Milbank believe – or more precisely, of what precisely would a radical orthodox politics consist? In addressing this question, Sharlet speculated then that “maybe orthodoxy sounds like theocracy [. . .] More to the point, then, one wonders whether a Radical Orthodox world might resemble a premodern one, in which the church ruled, and heretics, instead of waxing philosophical in endowed chairs, were burned alive at the stake.”<sup>6</sup>

To be sure, to be political does not mean to be violent, or to sanction political violence, but there is this nagging sense articulated by Sharlet and repeated many times over that Milbank and the school of Radical Orthodox theology he represents are unapologetic Christian triumphalists. The question is whether this specter of violence is an inevitable consequence of its metaphysical predilection. This would certainly be the argument of a contemporary such as Gianni Vattimo, a post-metaphysical hermeneutic philosopher who has made the direct link between the history of metaphysics and violence. Indeed, Vattimo has argued that the very idea of metaphysics is a violent imposition.<sup>7</sup> Likewise with John Caputo, who in an earlier published review of this debate between Milbank and Žižek asks, “Why not adopt the post-metaphysical idea that gives up searching for all such primordial underlying somethings or other?” The reason this post-metaphysical idea might be preferable, Caputo suggests, is that it would avoid the violence that is apparent throughout the book, both from Žižek, who, as Caputo writes, does not have “the slightest compunction about invoking violence” and from Milbank, who “batters our ears with a

barrage of rhetorical violence, with the vintage violence of theological imperialism.”<sup>8</sup> Like Vattimo, Caputo harbors a suspicion about metaphysics and concludes his review with the observation of how “this polemic about the metaphysics of Christ” somehow squeezes out entirely the peaceful and peace-loving Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount.

Before turning to the issue of Milbank’s rejection of history as evidenced in this volume, more must be said about this post-metaphysical theological challenge. But incidentally, it is Žižek, not Milbank, who directly takes up this challenge, and he does so by referencing Vattimo and Caputo specifically by way of a rebuttal of their respective post-metaphysical and deconstructive variants of postmodern theology – variants that Žižek labels as “soft” postmodern theology (260). Žižek begins this rebuttal with a pronouncement of a changing of the guard from Derrida and Habermas to Agamben and Badiou, or put otherwise, from ethico-politico philosophies of otherness to “its theologico-political turn: a decidedly materialist focus on [a] theological topic [ . . . ] ; a radical political stance inclusive of a critical attitude toward democracy – to put it in a vicious way, democracy is not to come, but to go” (255). This is to be “the first true taste of ‘thought of the twenty-first century’” (255). Then after summarizing the common features in both Caputo’s and Vattimo’s narration of the so-called postmodern return of religion, Žižek goes on to insist on a familiar theme to his previous work on religion – namely, the subversive and perverse core of Christianity.<sup>9</sup> For Žižek, Caputo and Vattimo pass from the trauma of the death of God to the death of the death of God in the postmodern return of religion too quickly and easily. By this (soft) reading, the death of God is rendered a happy event – a shedding of the moral-metaphysical God of ontotheology and a reawakening of genuinely biblical faith and a more authentic form of religiosity. But on the contrary, “what dies on the Cross,” Žižek insists, “is indeed God himself, not just his ‘finite container,’ a historically contingent name or form of God” (257). Žižek continues, “The only way to redeem the subversive core of Christianity is therefore to return to death-of-God theology” (260). And finally, Žižek concludes:

It is thus not that death-of-God theology is a middle-of-the-road phenomenon, partially negating the classical onto-theology while remaining within its horizon, which is truly left behind only with postmodern deconstructive religion; it is rather that something traumatic erupts in death-of-God theology, something that is covered up by postmodern theology. We should go even further here: what if the entire history of Christianity, inclusive of (and especially) its Orthodox versions, is structured as a series of defenses against the traumatic apocalyptic core of incarnation/death/resurrection? (260)

By this exchange Žižek shows himself as an adept theological thinker, which gives credence to his attempt at the revitalization of death-of-God theology through his seemingly oxymoronic atheistic theological materialism. His contribution to this debate is more theological than it is philosophical, anthropological, or even religious in that it is concerned with the being and nature of God by asking the core question of Christology. Indeed, along the way he even takes his

materialists forerunners, Feuerbach and Marx, to task by identifying “the limit of the Feuerbaching-Marxian logic of dis-alienation” (75). In this way, Žižek not only rises to the post-metaphysical theological challenge, but also provides the contours of what might be termed a new materialism.

There is nothing in this that should lead one to think that Žižek is merely a Johnny-come-lately playing in the field of theologians, or that his engagement with religion is merely an ironic strategy – or in the words of Caputo, a “Trojan-horse theology.”<sup>10</sup> Perhaps it is the case that Žižek can come to his conclusions just as easily by Lacan or Hitchcock as by Christ, but there is no denying that when it comes to his analysis of the meaning of Christ’s death on the cross he has the power to evoke the original scandal of the gospel as well, if not better, than any other contemporary thinker. And further, this reminder of the scandal of the gospel is an important and timely corrective to the triumphalistic tendencies of Christianity, as well as to the facile, self-help, or fundamentalist tendencies of contemporary religion. As Žižek writes, “Christ’s death on the Cross thus means that we should immediately ditch the notion of God as a transcendent caretaker who guarantees the happy outcome of our acts, the guarantee of historical teleology—Christ’s death on the Cross is the death of *this* God, it repeats Job’s stance, it refuses any ‘deeper meaning’ that obfuscates the brutal reality of historical catastrophes” (55). And on this point at least, Žižek stands together with Caputo and Vattimo and against Milbank in fully sharing the idea “of Christ as a weak God, a God reduced to a compassionate observer of human misery, unable to intervene or help” (55).

Which brings me back to the issue of history, and Milbank’s counter-narrative trope: where Žižek’s atheistic theological materialism leads him to an embrace of the void and to the conclusion of the essential meaninglessness of human history, Milbank’s orthodox theological materialism leads him to a position he terms a “more Catholic historiography” that reads modern history as a “distortion” (116). While this modern history is “full of authentically Christian developments,” Milbank admits, it has led to “horrendous distortions” because it has been allowed to occur “outside a proper Catholic aegis” (117). Along the way, while defending a paternalism modified “with a greater humility and attentiveness to populist feedback” (127), Milbank links Protestantism with atheism (117), calls capitalism “a mode of Protestant religion” (127) that provides “theological legitimation of a new sort of ‘amoral’ economic practice” (129), and ultimately finds in Protestant Christianity nothing but “totalitarian gloom” (131). Correlatively, it is the “pre-Cartesian Catholic metaphysical vision” that truly makes possible the joy of sex and universal love. Further, “whereas Žižek’s atheism achieves only a sad, resigned materialism,” Milbank claims that it is his Catholic perspective that “achieves a materialism in a joyful, positive sense” (125).

It is hard to know whether to take this unrelenting denigration of Protestantism seriously or not. My main contention is that what it truly reveals is that Milbank does not take history seriously. He repeatedly accuses Žižek of buying into a Protestant narrative of progress and treating history as a series of inevitable advances. Meanwhile he makes much of his own version of an “alternative Trinitarian modernity” (192, 209) and a “more humanist Reformation” (115) as

the road not taken. Admittedly, his vision of a world in which post-Reformation dogmatics and interreligious violence would not have dominated early modern European life, of “less dualism of nature and grace in theory and of secular and sacred in practice — with the upshot that economic and political institutions might have remained more ecclesiastically shaped, even though now more lay-directed” (115), is a beautiful and enticing one. But wishing it so does not make it so. Whether pretending that we could have a more humble paternalism that is now attentive to populist feedback or a return to a church monopoly under a proper Catholic aegis that is now more lay-directed, it is vision predicated on such a complete flight of fancy that it requires more than a leap of faith; it is a willful denial and denigration of history.

Our history may very well be a misbegotten path, but there is a great distance between the notion that the modern world is the historical triumph of the necessary outworking of a material logic and the notion that we may reverse or repudiate our history at our whim. It is true that our history is full of latent possibilities and of roads not taken, but the way to build a different and better future does not come by way of denial. Beware of the return of the repressed.

## Notes

1. Jeff Sharlet, “Theologians Seek to Claim the World with God and Postmodernism.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 46, issue 42 (June 23, 2000): A.20.
2. David Van Biema, “Thinkers: God as Postmodern.” *Time Magazine* (December 17, 2001), <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1001474,00.html#ixzz0y7OF5c76>.
3. Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009).
4. Sharlet, “Theologians Seek to Claim the World with God and Postmodernism.”
5. Kenneth Surin, “Rewriting the Ontological Script of Liberation: On the Question of Finding a New Kind of Political Subject,” in *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*. Ed. Davis, Creston et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 240–266, 255.
6. Sharlet, “Theologians Seek to Claim the World with God and Postmodernism.”
7. Gianni Vattimo and John D. Caputo, *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 93.
8. John D. Caputo, Review of *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* By Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, ed. Creston Davis, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=17605>.
9. For instance, see: Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: the Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003).
10. Caputo, Review of *Monstrosity of Christ*. This is an important part of Caputo’s critique of Žižek. For instance, towards the conclusion of his review of this volume in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, Caputo writes, “We all know that Žižek can very well make his main case with no mention of Christ at all, that he can use the seminars of Lacan, the films of Alfred Hitchcock or the novels of Stephen King just as well. His whole point, as he says elsewhere, is subversive: to build a Trojan-horse theology, to slip the nose of a more radical materialism under the Pauline tent of theology in order to announce the death of God.”