

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Third City

Radical Orthodoxy's (Emphatically) Complex Political Theology

NICHOLAS KRAUSE
and JONATHAN TRAN

INTRODUCTION

Radical Orthodoxy addresses its political vision to “the human future.”¹ That vision contains within it a picture of one such future and a warning about where the present will take us should we fail to achieve it.² It might be audacious to pair the former with the latter but this kind of ambition is the usual stuff of political theory, promises and warnings of what might be, investigations at the intersection of hope and despair. Radical Orthodoxy’s particular vision comes readymade with an account of political space complex enough, it believes, to capture the full array of creaturely possibility: a spiraling circulation of exchange that unfolds within the eternal gratuity of the Triune life. In Radical Orthodoxy (RO) one encounters a daring theoretical resumption of Christendom that ascends to the heights of divine economy, an aesthetic of such bold expectation that all other political theories are left looking like mere things of the world.

Observers troubled by RO’s pretensions usually explain away its extravagant claims, especially its overt espousal of Christendom, in one of two ways, both of which make RO more palatable by taking it less seriously. The first is to associate its vision of Christianity with historical Christendom, suggesting that the racist colonialism that materialized during the expansion of Western Christendom is constitutive of all attempts at Christendom, RO’s included. Observers worry that RO’s complicated relationship with difference already portends the kinds of eventualities that could befall its theoretical program: updated versions of imperialism, patriarchy, slavery, genocide, and so on.³ In this case it is exactly the presumption to aesthetic symmetry (tying practical judgments to a fundamental ontology, what RO calls a “politicized metaphysics”) that makes observers nervous.⁴ This dismissive strategy leaves undefended two premises: first, the idea that the ethos driving RO’s Christendom is operationally the same as that which drove historical Christendom; second, that “colonization” names exclusively one kind of project, a project which is unavoidably and inherently violent. If RO can show these premises to be false then the dismissal will be taken off the table and observers will be forced to address RO’s case for Christendom on its own terms. The second, reductive, strategy takes a different route. Rather than emphasizing RO’s potential dangers, it reduces RO’s ambitions to certain real world political measures in order to suggest that RO is ultimately only after

the regular old stuff of politics as usual. By reading Red Toryism or Blue Labour, respective movements within Britain's Conservative and Labour parties, as political expressions of RO without remainder, these observers can conceptually relegate RO to the familiar parochial world of contemporary politics. But this strategy comes with its own unproven premises: that no fundamental tensions exist between RO's aspirations to full Christendom and a pluralist and truly participatory democracy.

This chapter examines RO's political vision, what we have so far described as its aesthetical divine economy, and evaluate whether the two dismissive strategies have done anything to diminish its promise. Our conclusion about the first, related to Christendom and colonization, will be that RO turns those concerns on their head and makes Christendom's colonization, of a sort, strangely logical. It is precisely this coherence that makes RO's vision both inspiringly bold and consistently worrisome. We will conclude that the second question remains open, specifically as it relates to Blue Labour, with the connections with RO still developing, and instructively so. The promise here is that Blue Labour will press into service RO's aesthetics and make it do work it has yet to do, and that, in turn, RO will offer to Blue Labour conceptual resources for construing its politics as a theological aesthetics, and reasons for why such a move matters. While we will leave untreated RO's relationship to Red Toryism, we do think it rather remarkable that some within both major UK political parties have found common cause with RO's extravagant political vision.⁵ Our conclusion about these matters will be that the unfinished business of determining RO's practical relationship to politics, itself an endlessly provisional affair, leaves troubling the air of finality looming over its theological narrative.

One final note before starting: we will identify Radical Orthodoxy with the work of John Milbank. In the late 1990s when RO was getting off the ground, it could count among its company a host of theologians, some of whom have stayed (e.g., Connor Cunningham, Phillip Blond, and others) and others who have for whatever reason departed its company (e.g., Mary-Jane Rubenstein, William Cavanaugh, Peter Candler, and others). At RO's core was Milbank, along with Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, the primary progenitors of its vision and brand. With Pickstock's and Ward's allegiance to RO now less obvious, we are left, in the end, with Milbank as its chief defender. As the most ambitious of RO's founding members, Milbank should be seen as articulating RO's vision in its most characteristic, formidable, and comprehensive form.

PERPETUAL EUCHARIST

In popular rendering RO is seen as a religious critique of secular accounts of "pure" difference, or what can be called differential ontologies. This rendering envisages RO's project as primarily reactionary and regressive, a menacing vision of social harmony predicated on a return to premodern notions of hierarchy and complementarity, wherein Christendom institutionalizes Christianity's rejection of postmodern difference. When observers identify in RO a nostalgia for medieval Christendom, they point to its seeming desire to turn back the clock on freedoms gained during and since the Enlightenment—freedoms from the various hierarchies and social organizations of an oppressive Christendom. This perception is somewhat deserved since RO offers a direct and often pugnacious challenge to secular modernity in both its intellectual and political forms. In Milbank's hands, Kant and Hegel and Deleuze and Derrida are all made to look simultaneously noxious and silly, as is the entire enterprise of cultural despising that ended the West's long-held religious enchantment.⁶ If postmodernity has made its name

by accusing Christians of oppressing difference then Milbank, in attacking postmodernity, seems suspiciously to be attacking difference. His counterintuitive claim that postmodernity, not Christianity, endangers difference, and that Christianity is the best chance difference will ever have, strikes many as philosophically bizarre and empirically ridiculous. RO goes so far as to locate the origins of postmodernity within Christianity itself, insisting on a declension narrative where the distorted desire to be like God, predicating a human concurrence separate from God (amounting to a type of equality with God), resulted in the collapse of the very conceptual infrastructure by which humans rightly could be like God.⁷ RO counters postmodernity's genealogies with one of its own, asserting that the Triune God has everything to do with difference and only by properly regarding God can one properly regard difference. The only response one can and should have to postmodern "ontologies of violence," RO claims, is a counter-mythos of "ontological peace" whereby difference gets theologically placed as expressive of the divine insofar as it enters into a fundamental social harmony. This strategy will sound to many as all too familiar, especially to postmodern ears already weary of theological arrogance. Is not RO's vision just another iteration of Christianity's dreadful relationship with difference?

Yet RO's criticisms of postmodernity and its counter-ontology of difference are meant to serve a positive vision that has ended up getting lost in arguments about the accuracy and fairness of RO's critiques and RO's appetite for entertaining them. Unable to convince its detractors that its rejection of secularism's account of difference did not amount to a rejection of difference as such, RO became mired in endless metaphysical debates about difference and various intellectual-historical arguments, ultimately obscuring the force of its constructive vision. This positive overarching vision, within which RO makes its case against postmodern secularism, is a distinctly political-theological one: a Christian socialism which RO believes to be liturgically and philosophically basic to Christian orthodoxy. Thus, Milbank writes in the preface to the second edition of *Theology and Social Theory* that the aim of the book's argument is decidedly political and progressive: "[to] supply again a new ontological and eschatological basis for socialist hope."⁸ Such an ontology of mutuality and cooperation is precisely what postmodern differential ontologies lack, RO contends.⁹ According to what RO considers Christianity's Trinitarian metaphysics and participatory ontology of peace, sacramentally present everywhere in creation (creation as sacramental presence) is a dynamic gift-structure that exhibits God by gifting (*ad intra*) the natural with a share of supernatural—creation as gift.¹⁰ A politics responsive to these claims is what RO is after.

RO's positive political vision starts from a baseline orthodoxy. The distinct persons of the Trinity are identified by the gifts each gives and reciprocates. For RO, the oneness of the Triune God consists in an eternal exchange of charity amidst difference. The divine Trinity is "transcendental peace through differential relation"¹¹ and the Triune life is a sociality of harmonious difference.¹² Divine simplicity and eternity logically require that this exchange be elegant, where God's giving does not issue in distinct parts (say, something outside of God) or distinct moments (say, gaps arising between divine longing and divine satisfaction). For Milbank, the possibility of creaturely difference comes by analogical participation and consists in elegant relations of gift-exchange—creaturely economies participating in, and derivative of, the divine economy.¹³ God's life of difference images itself in every aspect (*vestigium trinitatis*) of creaturely life, though, as temporal and not eternal, creaturely life is complex inversely to how divine life is elegant.¹⁴ Creation is possessed of the integrity of its own exchange but in a manner befitting its temporal status, hence Milbank speaks of creaturely gift-exchange in terms of "prophetic delay,"

“non-identical repetition,” and “asymmetrical reciprocity.”¹⁵ The complexity of creaturely life matches its contingent constitution, comprised as it is by time and its distinctions between actuality and possibility, as well as the distensions constitutive of life under sin.¹⁶ Creaturely existence is complex, utterly dependent on God, and as composite, capable of coming undone when distanced from God.¹⁷ Creatures are capable of harmony—indeed, they are created in and for it—but harmony, while necessary *for* their existence, is not necessary *of* their existence. Genuine and genuinely social human gift-giving becomes the occasion of creaturely harmony, where gift-giving assumes an ascending spiral, each gift reciprocated by something new as creatures journey into God as creation rises in divinizing harmony.¹⁸

According to Milbank, the constitutive human activities of language and making—the creative activities fundamental to politics—reveal the *verbum* that is the Son and the *donum* that is the Spirit, God the Father grounding divine gift-giving and exchange.¹⁹ Structured this way, language and making each gesture beyond themselves, inclining toward God for the completion of their activity in what Milbank calls a “supernatural pragmatism.”²⁰ Because satisfaction in God entails satisfaction in God’s creation, because God has structured creation this way, human desire in language and making requires others with whom to speak and make. Christian *socialism* expresses in political form the inexhaustibly social nature of creation, “the echo of divine creation and divine grace,” with sin evinced as those instances when creatures privatize that which is meant to be shared.²¹ Just as socialism is the economic form of human mimesis, so is neoliberal capitalism, especially in its post-Keynesian modality, the form of its human distortion, made possible by the interstices of time and realized in the creature’s unwillingness to gracefully bear time’s complexities. RO’s case for Christian socialism then is its espousal for an expressed and harmonious complexity that inclines creation toward God, an entirely plausible social form given creation’s “supernaturalized” constitution.²² Such a politics of mutuality, reciprocity, cooperation, and solidarity is “more realist than mere realism,” for it reflects creation’s most basic ontological composition.²³ At the heart of RO is thus a series of liturgical conventions natural to all that exists in God insofar as it exists at all. Milbank terms this “perpetual Eucharist,” wherein “gifts collected, offered by all, as all, to the all who is One,” are then “received back by all from the One, who are all thereby received into these same different gifts which are his Word.”²⁴ Socialism simply names the politics of this Eucharistic exchange.

CHRISTENDOM AS THE THIRD CITY

Within Augustine’s well-known earthly/eternal cities schematic, Milbank imagines a “third city.”²⁵ But contrary to other Augustinians who thematize this third space between the earthly and eternal cities in terms of a mixed *tertium quid* (Henri Irénée Marrou) or a neutral *saeculum* (R.A. Markus) which divides the world into sacred and secular spheres, for Milbank this city is the *social* form Christian pilgrimage assumes in the world. The third city is an aspiring cosmopolis that fuses the natural goodness and desire of the earthly city to its completion and consummation in the eternal. This follows RO’s conviction that there is not, and cannot be, some autonomous secular space outside of God, a natural order not always already “supernaturalized.” Given the social nature of creation this fusion must, RO believes, emanate in actual political arrangements. The third city is Christendom, the church’s “extending the sphere” of its “socially aesthetic harmony”²⁶ into political life, infusing the natural goodness of political society with

divine governance. This step marks an important conceptual development (or at minimum, explication) for RO, moving from an earlier polemicized political theory that pitted Christianity and secularity against one another, to a *via media* between them, allowing RO to critique political concepts and practices when they fail to embody the politics of the third city and to endorse them when they do. One witnesses here a theoretical benefit to RO's insistently participatory ontology, which should never have been allowed to permit of polemics but instead highlights a common humanity and possibilities of genuine political cooperation across difference.

According to Milbank, the politics of the third city includes two primary loci, initially a positive function that relationally operationalizes human language and making, institutionalization as artistic endeavor. There is also a negative function, and here readers of *De Civitate Dei* will recognize the Augustinian imperative to restrain evil and its effects. Milbank interprets the imperative's internal logic as pushing toward the more primary positive goal, pressing beyond the innately dissatisfying work of restraint toward the positive pursuit of goodness, to action as such, wherein human artifice participates in God, as already evidenced in the third city's first function.²⁷ Milbank pushes these considerations to their logical, but still stunning, conclusion: "Without this bending, justice cannot itself remain just and law cannot itself remain legitimate. And yet exactly this bending of the necessary but imperfect towards the unnecessary but perfect, exactly this Christian politics, actually belongs to the primary task of Christian conversion. This is one reason why the idea of Christianity without Christendom is a self-deluding and superficial illusion."²⁸ According to RO, just as Christians should, without controversy, believe that being Christian is better than not being Christian, so Christians should believe that a Christian society is better suited for human flourishing than a society ruled otherwise. Thus, Milbank believes that for every morally important action, no matter how quotidian (e.g., *Beyond Secular Order* uses the example of driving), there are properly moral ways things should go (i.e., one should drive locally and globally conscious of others), and Christians are best positioned to know as much. Some will take this to be culturally invasive, but Milbank sees it as the logical conclusion of the following sequence: (1) The world is designed by God for creaturely flourishing; (2) Christians are those who attempt to live in accord with God's design for creaturely flourishing; therefore; (3) Christians will best manage creaturely affairs for flourishing. RO thinks it programmatically absurd for Christians (likely suffering from false humility and/or a failure of nerve) to claim 1 and 2 without 3. RO's argument about difference—that Christianity is most able to appropriately relate to difference—simply falls within this logical sequence, and it is *principally* for that reason, in RO's vision, the church should be in charge of managing society. The church alone is the paradigmatic social community, called to love neighbors, pray for enemies, serve the poor and sick, and otherwise live peaceably and encourage others to do so. Only in this arrangement, RO contends, will human society be able to properly receive difference, including the difference that is the non-Christian. The third city is thus the political manifestation of Christian hospitality.

Much of the conceptual payoff of RO's fundamental ontology comes from its recognition of creaturely complexity and the need to politically account for that complexity.²⁹ If one does not understand this complexity and the need to organize for it, one will not understand the point of RO's ambitions, including its criticisms of neoliberalism, which RO sees as reductive exactly where complexity is needed. Similarly, if one does not recognize that creaturely complexity participates in divine elegance, where God's eternity funds, through the Son's *verbum* and in the Spirit's *donum*, the perpetual

circulation of charity, then one misses the elegant cosmic foundation of that complexity, its impetus and possibility. Understanding RO as primarily oriented toward a constructive political project, where a Christian socialist ontology occasions and enables practical political entailments, contextualizes RO's considerable attention to secular critical theory (i.e., Nietzsche and his inheritors—Deleuze, Derrida, and Foucault). Within this context one comes to see RO's critical moves as but conceptual ground clearing for that which RO understands to be its more immediate deconstructive goal: unmasking late capitalism's disastrously possessive commodification of creation.³⁰ RO views secularism's differential ontologies as incapable of grounding the kinds of social solidarity, commonness, and unity necessary for resisting neoliberal capitalism and realizing a politics of the common good. Discourses that prioritize alterity to the exclusion of community end up casting the social in terms of Darwinian tragedy, where only the "fittest" survive and thus *should* rule.³¹ Differential ontologies, RO believes, in their rejection of the possibility of unity or commonness across difference, substantiate neoliberalism's essential logic.³² As much as these discourses would like to think they honor difference, RO contends they end up establishing the conditions for its erasure. Difference without harmonious relation—what Milbank terms an "ontology of violence"—either disintegrates into atomization or gives rise to domination. Milbank challenges postmodern theorists of difference to supply a better ontology for their likely own espousals of socialism. He refers to socialism as "the joker in the pack of left-wing options," insofar as "its account of society as the upshot of visionary work requires a certain appeal to the 'sacrality of the many' or the 'mystique of the collective.'" In other words, secular socialisms lack the necessary theological and ontological grounds for socialist community, and therefore must appeal to theological, metaphysical, and almost mystical notions of utopian community.³³

In contrast to political economies that presume Darwinian tragedy and its suppositions of scarcity and competition, RO's socialism presupposes charity as the most basic law of creation, God's plenitude coursing through all of creaturely life and enabling a politics of mutuality, solidarity, and equity.³⁴ RO turns the tables on concerns about RO's latent colonialism by arguing that it is indeed a neoliberal ontology with its espousal of an originary and originating agonistic violence that inaugurates a dark age of imperial conquest. Therefore, RO rhetorically asks: Why wouldn't the church see as its mission the constraint of *that* violence? How else can that be pursued except by political rulership? If RO's project is finally deemed a colonizing censure of difference, it must be acknowledged to be a *socialist* one, unrelenting in its denunciation of capitalism's anti-social operations and effects. RO believes the human future is worth fighting for, and (obviously) does not dither from advocating for (over against neoliberal exploitation) "the international spread of the charitable *politeia* which was the *ecclesia*."³⁵

The complexity of creaturely life, with its horizontal and vertical investments, requires, according to RO, a complex mixed governance, comprised of a democratic populace apprenticed by a *morally* elite aristocracy charged with forming citizens' democratic sensibilities and habits, and finally a monarchical cultural reservoir of institutional memory—and all of this as uniquely and constitutively Christian achievements.³⁶ Only by first being formed in character, which requires mnemonic anchoring, can citizens be trusted to act in their own best interest, where their best interests naturally includes, insofar as it supernaturally inclines to God, the best interests of communities. Citizens grow in virtue by first mimicking the practices of "the virtuous few" who are liturgically formed in kenosis, and then carry political traditions forward toward new ways of seeing (through natural conventions) and being (through creative activity) in the world.³⁷ RO

speaks of a republican hierarchy that is both authoritative and self-cancelling; the more the elite succeeds in forming a new generation, the less it will need to exercise authority, eventuating in perpetual replacement.³⁸ Not only might citizens transform the discourses they inherit, they are expected to, and, given creation's deep gift-structure, enabled to—such is RO's conception of democracy as a *supernaturally* pragmatic tradition. Its account of formation is hierarchical precisely in this way, masters training apprentices until those apprentices assume mastery. Without apprenticeship (whether through wise individuals or seasoned associational communities), the citizenry will not realize its democratic power; without apprentices adapting traditions to new contexts, democracy will turn up empty.³⁹ Such political formation and education occurs, RO maintains, within the manifold associations and intermediary institutions that comprise the “complex space” between the individual and state, and which shields individuals, families and communities from the sheer power of the state and market.⁴⁰ Such a complex and plural space contests the unilateral sovereignty of the neoliberal market-state which threatens to reduce citizens to passive consumers of ever new goods.

RO's hierarchical account of democratic citizenship can be described in the terms of gift-giving, with masters gifting their students by teaching them and students reciprocating those gifts with ones of their own, moving the tradition forward.⁴¹ If teachers do not raise up new generations of citizens to exercise political judgment, the community will die; if students fail to provide a new generation of judgments, the community will die. Human civilization is entirely dependent on the gift-structure of its existence. To be sure, RO's account of mixed governance presumes distinctions between relative faculties of and maturations in goodness, truth, and beauty, but it is hard to imagine any account of diversified political life—what Milbank variously describes as “Baroque”, “poetic,” and “gothic”—that does not. This is the thrust of Milbank's critique of differential ontologies: they imagine difference as anarchic and chaotic, manifesting in various competitive relations and agonistic struggles.⁴² It is only within ontologically structured processional hierarchy, an ordered and peaceful unfolding of difference, that difference thrives.⁴³ Therein, not only relative virtues, but also roles, distinguish between the specific features that comprise a society: passions and skills and callings and dispositions and personalities and gifts and histories, so on and so forth.⁴⁴ It is within a hierarchically ordered politics that difference can be accommodated, not by atomizing and thereby sequestering difference but by properly identifying it so that it can be positioned to flourish. RO's political vision includes then both a requirement to creatively accommodate difference and an account of how that accommodation will grow a society by pragmatically adopting it to the local conditions of difference. Human existence is not only ontologically ecstatic, forever growing into God, but also pragmatically so, forever growing into creation, the latter participating in the former, the former growing out of the latter. Local conditions of speaking and making bespeak and fashion a politics; hence, there is no one form of governance sufficient for every situation. Rather, each hierarchy will need to accommodate to “particular geographical, social and historical circumstances”; political community is “not a utopia to be imposed, but something only achievable in certain historical circumstances.”⁴⁵ In this regard, Milbank positions his Christian socialism—shaped as it is by traditions of guild socialism, syndicalism, and Anglican Christian socialism—against the idealistic orientations of certain Marxian varieties.⁴⁶ Socialist community must come “by grace,” which means it cannot be rationally planned or anticipated by utopian visions. These latter strategies enforce an artificial unity upon difference, whereas Milbank insists genuine socialism must come organically from within local cultures and traditions.⁴⁷ Such

socialist communities are premised on the right ordering of differences in charitable relation, which, according to RO, manifests in a hierarchical ordering.⁴⁸

It is, from RO's perspective, hierarchy then that makes flourishing democracy possible, hierarchy not only *of* difference but *for* difference.⁴⁹ Thus, paradoxically, the real rationale for democracy is *extra*-democratic: the legitimacy of popular assent lies in its eventual conversion, through education and training in virtue, to the common good.⁵⁰ Once again, the plane of immanent life is seen as unfolding within and expressing a higher life, the creature's ascent to the divine, which cannot be had except within the structures of creation.⁵¹ Milbank is especially subtle here, as one would need him to be, suggesting that hierarchy does not undermine the integrity of each station of being, but rather affirms its absolute necessity in the order of things.⁵²

The full flowering of RO's political vision comes in the rich complexity of its political economy, what Milbank calls a "gift economy" and develops as a "civil economy socialism."⁵³ For Milbank, economy is necessarily political, wherein economic exchange is a form of gift-sharing. Milbank's civil economy then focuses on the "family, guild, fraternity, commune, corporation"—those relational networks necessary for the cultivation of economic virtue, the temporal basis of all other virtues.⁵⁴ Such social forms also entail hierarchical relations, both within groups and between them, as each serves different roles and raises up initiates to take up their roles in ever new ways. But within RO's account of hierarchy superiority is always being given up, given away, capitulated, and gifted—that is, shared.⁵⁵

Fusing elements of Catholic Social Thought and Italian civil economy,⁵⁶ RO advances a vision of a forthrightly socialized economy. It calls for re-embedding markets within social relations by directing the free activities of work and trade to the common good, ordering legitimate profit-making activities to human flourishing and social benefit, and encouraging and rewarding virtuous behavior in the marketplace through tax incentives and the bestowing of public honor.⁵⁷ Practically, this means encouraging greater sharing of profits and risks between capital and labor, lenders and borrowers; strengthening professional vocational associations and guilds and their roles within industry; and providing more robust legal frameworks within which negotiations of wages, prices, and share-values are jointly determined by owners, consumers, workers, and other stakeholders.⁵⁸ In short, RO's civil economy seeks to integrate aspects of the market economy (legitimate profit-seeking, competition, trade) with a concern for social welfare and genuine human flourishing. Markets, RO holds, are most truly free not when they are subjected to capitalist logics and neoliberal policies, but rather when they are socialized and ordered to the common good.

Unlike doctrinaire socialisms, then, with their Manichean attitudes toward capitalism, RO is not opposed to eventualities like money, contracts, property, ownership, and the like.⁵⁹ Nor is it so naive as to believe that state possession of these eventualities makes them immune from corruption. RO is opposed to their distortion, including their state-sponsored distortions, further demonstrating its Augustinian *util/frui* approach to worldly affairs. It worries that the privatizing of capital benefits some to the exclusion of the commons, gifts now ripped out of their structure of exchange and manipulated for artificial gain; money becomes vicious when it is sought for its own sake, as in the case of usury; ownership becomes deadly when instead of gathering community, it breaks down and divides community. RO thus proposes the fusion of contract with gift, the democratization and wide distribution of property, and the recovery of cooperative and "associationist" modes of labor.⁶⁰ In short, RO seeks a truly social economy. Its socialism

should be thought of less in terms of the standard tenets of an economic doctrine—the overcoming of class, just distribution of goods, and public control of the means of production—and more as a mode of *social*-ism where those tenets organically take root.

RADICAL ORTHODOXY'S ENDURING SERIOUSNESS

Milbank asks, “Does all this sound fantastic? No, the fantastic is what we have: an economy that destroys life, babies, childhood, adventure, locality, beauty, the exotic, the erotic, people and the planet itself.”⁶¹ It is precisely this kind of rhetorical confidence that raises worries of an extravagance that too easily lends itself to colonialism. Milbank’s response to these charges is to question received notions of colonization by: first, distinguishing between kinds of colonization and their respective ends; second, suggesting colonization’s unavailability; in order that, third, historical colonization and some possible colonization be more hopefully interpreted as aspiring toward certain kinds of futures.⁶² Aside from the question of whether Milbank arrives at his point through revisionist history, a more important question is whether Milbank can actually avoid the pitfalls he believes he anticipates.

At the end of *Beyond Secular Order*, Milbank calls for a new politics that “fuses Christian socialism with a new sense of what is valid in the ‘conservative’ critique of modernity . . . a (genuinely) ‘third way’ beyond modern left and right.”⁶³ Considering how seriously RO takes the applicability of its theories, one senses that Milbank has specifics in mind. As it turns out, RO has found common cause with some advancing a new Blue Labour politics, blending traditions of economic radicalism within Britain’s Labour Party with a “blue” conservative appreciation of local cultures, mediatory institutions, religious traditions, and the family.⁶⁴ Yet the relationship between RO and Blue Labour is more complicated than some, including Milbank, might suppose, possessing certain tensions still to be resolved. Reading Blue Labour as an instantiation of RO’s political vision is wishful thinking, far ahead of a number of practical and theoretical considerations to be determined. While much of Blue Labour’s platform, especially its economic vision, embodies the gift economy RO speaks of, Blue Labour’s grassroots, radically democratic orientation complicates RO’s “mixed polity” comprised as it is of elite “philosopher-rulers,” and Blue Labour’s vital emphasis on pluralism clearly pushes against RO’s case for Christendom.

The principal merits Milbank finds in Blue Labour are twofold. First, Blue Labour’s economic vision, chiefly developed by Jewish theorist Maurice Glasman, is consonant with much of RO’s proposals for civil economy socialism. No wonder the majority of Milbank’s engagement with Blue Labour has been specifically on matters of political economy. Second, Blue Labour’s re-centering of virtue, the common good, and a moral “ethos” to politics echoes much of RO’s “politics of virtue.” Milbank understands this virtuous politics to entail a renewed appreciation for a virtuous aristocracy, public honor and democracy’s dependency on hierarchies of virtue.⁶⁵ Indeed, relating it to RO’s stridently theological vision highlights the ingenuity of Blue Labour’s political offerings, the possibility of holding together an account of virtue substantial enough to resist the corrosive effects of neoliberalism and a practice of politics capacious enough to generously receive radical difference. As mentioned earlier, it is somewhat remarkable that RO, with its self-consciously audacious claims and aspirations, has found a place for itself within Britain’s political future. But it is not entirely surprising, especially if one imagines those aspirations arising within the same context (historical, economic, social, ecclesiastical, etc.) that animates much of British politics.

Yet it must be remembered that RO's politics of the "third city" is a vision of Christendom that cannot simply be reduced to a democratic political platform. To do so is to soften and mitigate the radicalism of RO's divine politics. RO aspires to see the political instantiation of its Christian ontology and so approaches politics as the enterprise of realigning political society in light of these philosophical commitments. It is on this point that one notices the greatest tensions between RO's political philosophy and Blue Labour's radically democratic sensibilities, embodied in figures like Glasman, Arnie Graf, and Luke Bretherton, for whom Blue Labour arose out of the experiences of grassroots organizing.⁶⁶ Bretherton writes that Blue Labour is not a "political philosophy" at all, but a mode of political *practice*—one which prioritizes "practice before theory," "people before programme," and "politics before procedure."⁶⁷ Politics belongs properly to the realm of practical reason, rather than ideology or speculative philosophy, and thus Blue Labour understands the work of politics to be not the instantiation of any particular conceptualization of the good life or version of the common good, but rather the formation of a common life amidst difference. Blue Labour as a mode of political *praxis* thus entails practices of listening, collective deliberation and judgment-making amidst communities of great difference, so as to conciliate various interests and discern and pursue goods in common.

Blue Labour, then, would complicate RO's insistence that democracy be disciplined by hierarchies of virtue and constrained by the wisdom of elites. Whereas RO worries about democracy's tendency to become untethered from the metaphysically true and so seeks to ground political order in a philosophically derived vision of the common good, Blue Labour suggests politics is primarily "the negotiation of a shared life among diverse and competing interests," which "does not demand that those with different interests, loyalties or views leave the room before the negotiations begin."⁶⁸ Because Blue Labour presumes a radically pluralist set of political actors and seeks to forge a common life amidst their differences, it is not clear that RO can rest content with such a politics, insofar as RO aspires to the construction of a "third city" whose constitution reflects the divine life, in which difference is always reconciled in unity.⁶⁹ Blue Labour's *praxis* seeks not the conversion of difference to a shared, singular conception of the good life and the common good, but rather the negotiation of difference and the establishment of relations of neighborliness and friendship across such difference. Whether or not RO can come to appreciate this kind of radical democracy and politics of difference is dependent on how it comes to see the relation between its ontology and that ontology's practical entailments. Must difference be managed and ordered to a vision of political community known in advance of democratic negotiation, or can politics become, for RO, a site of genuine encounter with difference, wherein the "third city" is perpetually co-created with others in new and unexpected ways?

Interestingly it is at the point of just this set of concerns that Milbank reasserts his case for imperial over secular order, and here we return to the two strategies of dismissal with which this essay began. Discussing RO's possible consilience with Blue Labour, Milbank invokes a "more benign, plural and inclusive" empire that can be more determined by "indigenous modes of political control, while also fostering a certain cross-cultural and international modulation" than that which comprised historical British imperialism. Milbank assays a Christendom that has learned from its mistakes: "That this destiny has often been pursued with brutality and was abandoned so recklessly and irresponsibly—with dire consequences in the Near East—only precludes us trying to pursue it in the future more charitably and cooperatively if we act out of guilt, which is always to act in bad faith."⁷⁰ Notice Milbank's aforementioned move to complexify the historical legacy of European colonization, intimating its irresponsibly premature conclusion, as part of the

rationale for a new colonization. How is one to take this emblem of RO, seemingly guileless in its pretensions and possibly deadly for that reason? If we have successfully provided reasons to take RO seriously, to not dismiss out of hand its pro-Christendom stance, then we are faced with an importantly interesting puzzlement. One might look at RO and its emphasis on ontological peace and its practical urgings for socialism and decide, given the seeming goodwill and the desired beneficial outcomes, its proposal does not amount to what was pernicious about historical colonization—say, its motivations and impulses and seminal expressions. Or, one might, upon examining its case, decide that its emphases and practical urges, especially its seeming goodwill and benevolences, just *is* what colonization has always amounted to. One is left with either a very provocative way of talking about Christian social engagement, mission, and conversion (the bitter pill of recognizing that *all* social and political programs are “colonizing” insofar as they prescribe what they take to be true), or a very polite and elegant way of dressing up the same old colonial impulse.

In an essay early in RO’s history, Gerard Loughlin assessed RO’s possibilities and problems. There, he attended to the themes of mastery, difference, and pluralism within RO’s rhetorical strategy, themes we have detailed above with reference to RO’s politics. Speaking of RO’s genealogical strategies, Loughlin offered two ways of thinking about RO, which we delineate here:

- A. RO’s fondness for the Christian “master-narrative” which “positions the narratives of secular reason,” and indeed all other narratives, through rhetorical subjection and/or absorption, betrays a proclivity toward mastery that forgets its own contingency and fragility as *narrative*. RO’s rhetorical strategies—the “forms” in which the Christian story is articulated—exhibit modes of domination and colonization that betray the “content” of that story. RO is thus seen to offer a story which fails to acknowledge itself as such, a claim to mastery and finality cloaked in the attributes of narrativity while yet aspiring to totality.
- B. “Rather than the monopoly of a master-narrative, which positions all other narratives,” RO’s story could be articulated as “an ever-extending tradition of narrative linkages, in which now some stories, now others, function as the synchronic animators of the rest, so that there is always a ‘buzz’ within the tradition, a movement of story against story, a never stable positioning and an always possible indeterminacy with regard to new linkages, new stories.” Such a narrative practice acknowledges not only the contingency of its practice but also the provisionality and contestability of its claims. It thus aspires to dialogical encounter and receptive generosity to others.⁷¹

Our thought is that the most promising version of RO’s political theology is something like Blue Labour read in terms of Loughlin’s option B, where the spoken/made content of RO’s gift-centered story of kenotic self-cancellation, what one might call a good form of mastery, can help RO resist mastery’s deadly forms. Then we might arrive at what Loughlin describes as “a ‘buzz’ within the tradition” of RO, a “movement of story against story, a never stable positioning and an always possible indeterminacy with regard to new linkages, new stories.” One might even name that buzz “democracy,” the practice of forging political communities and discovering goods in common through negotiations that demand postures of receptivity to difference and change. Blue Labour’s commitments to dialogical processes that prioritize pragmatic adaptation over aesthetic purity—“practice before theory,” “people before programme” and “politics before procedure”—can put RO’s “supernatural pragmatism” on the road to realizing the social hope at the center of its socialist politics.

Identifying commonalities and continuities between RO and Blue Labour comes to the question of imagination or what we earlier intimated as the ambition of political theory, “promises and warnings of what might be, investigations at the intersection of hope and despair.” Political imagination begins with stepping into commonalities and continuities where they are to be found, along with acknowledging when and why they cannot be found, and motivating commonality and continuity when despair forces imagination underground. One can imagine the forms Blue Labour linked to Loughlin’s RO “buzz” might take—everything from generating radical political agency out of rather than over against storied forms of place and community to resisting neoliberal aggression by forging alliances that arise out of practices of scriptural reasoning between Muslim, Jewish, Christian, and other religious and non-religious readers of texts to scenes of political repair occasioned when hierarchical self-canceling energizes re-memory of moral injury. Radical Orthodoxy and Blue Labour are both projects of political imagining. If they can respectively survive dismissal and reduction then they can begin to imagine together.

NOTES

1. Note the subtitle of Radical Orthodoxy’s most developed treatment of politics: John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).
2. John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 261.
3. For a discussion of RO, imperialism, and colonialism, see Romand Coles, “Storied Others and the Possibilities of *Caritas*: Milbank and Neo-Nietzschean Ethics,” *Modern Theology* 8:4 (1992), 331–351; Graeme Smith, “Mission and Radical Orthodoxy,” *Modern Believing* 44:1 (2003), 47–57; and the relevant essays in *The Poverty of Radical Orthodoxy*, ed. Lisa Isherwood and Marko Zlomislčić (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012).
4. Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 15. See, for example, the critique of Milbank in Kyle Gingerich Hiebert, *The Architectonics of Hope: Violence, Apocalyptic, and the Transformation of Political Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 94–95, 98–100. Gingerich Hiebert specifically draws attention to the way Milbank articulates this vision in such a way as to make impossible genuine self-criticism and to disable meaningful engagement with interlocutors.
5. Those interested in Red Toryism can consult Phillip Blond’s *Red Tory: How the Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), stemming from his February 28, 2008 *Prospect* essay, “Rise of the Red Tories.”
6. See, for instance, Chapters 4, 6, and 10 of John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).
7. Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 42–49, 112–113. See also John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 44–45.
8. “Preface to the Second Edition: Between Liberalism and Positivism,” in Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, xiv.
9. Milbank contends that, lacking the necessary ontological foundations for a truly socialist politics, the political manifestation of postmodern differential ontologies can only be either liberalism or fascism—the former which rejects any notion of a common good and thus relegates difference to the sphere of private expression and self-cultivation; the latter which names politics as the site of agonistic struggle wherein the “fittest” survive and rule. See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 279, 323–325.

10. On the fundamental gift-structure of creation, see John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (New York: Routledge, 2003), xi; John Milbank, "Liberality versus Liberalism," in *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 257–258; John Milbank, "Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysics," *Modern Theology* 11 (1995), 116–161; and Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 72–77, 107–108.
11. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 6.
12. Milbank delineates this account of difference in terms of the Trinity's "first" and "second" differences: "This is why (speculatively speaking), within the Godhead, there is held by Christianity to arise after the 'first difference' which is the Son, also the 'second difference' of the Holy Spirit, constituted as an equally pure relation to the Father, but 'through' the Son. The Spirit is this relation of the one and the many, this *ratio* of charity, but the relational character of this ratio is now truly affirmed, because the Son, and the differences contained within the Son, has now become a moment of *mediation* between Father and Spirit . . . Therefore difference, after first constituting unity (the Son causing 'backwards' the Father) becomes a *response* to unity that is more than unity, which unity itself cannot predict—since mediation exceeds unity just as it exceeds difference . . . The harmony of the Trinity is therefore not the harmony of a finished totality but a 'musical' harmony of infinity" (Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 430–431). See also John Milbank, "The Second Difference," in *The Word Made Strange*, 171–193. See also John Milbank, *The Religious Dimension in the Thought of Giambattista Vico 1558–1774: Part I The Early Metaphysics* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 116–149.
13. For Milbank's most sophisticated account of gift-giving, see Milbank, "Grace: The Midwinter's Sacrifice," in *Being Reconciled*, 138–161 (see especially 154).
14. See Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 53 fn82.
15. Milbank, "Can a Gift Be Given?" 125–152; and Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 156–161.
16. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 53.
17. Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 280.
18. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 171.
19. *Ibid.*, 199–200; and Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 84–113.
20. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 206–252 and *Beyond Secular Order*, 213–214. See also Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 104–105, 195–198.
21. John Milbank, "The Transcendality of the Gift: A Summary," in *Future of Love*, 359–363. See also Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 35–36, 267.
22. See also, for example, Milbank's account of forgiveness in Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 46–47.
23. Milbank and Pabst, *Politics of Virtue*, 8.
24. Milbank, "Can a Gift Be Given?" 152.
25. Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 228–236.
26. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 428.
27. Milbank relies much on Maurice Blondel's theory of action. See Maurice Blondel, *Action (1893): Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, trans. Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame, IN: The University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).
28. Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 233, 248.
29. See Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 56–57, 148–149.
30. Milbank thus reads Nietzsche as not sufficiently different from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English political economists, in terms of how both imagine the condition

- of primitive humanity as one of “agon or playful, competitive struggle” (Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 283–284).
31. *Ibid.*, xiv.
 32. *Ibid.*, xxi. Milbank notes similar critiques of postmodern thought from theorists on the secular left like Alain Badiou and Peter Hallward, who likewise see that “the philosophy of difference grounds only a social *agon* and therefore is complicit with capitalism.”
 33. Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 262.
 34. Milbank, “Can a Gift Be Given?” 124.
 35. Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 229. See also Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 176–177.
 36. For Milbank’s delineation of this mixed arrangement, containing elements of democratic, aristocratic, and monarchical traditions, see Milbank, “Liberality versus Liberalism,” 245–249; and Milbank and Pabst, *Politics of Virtue*, 205–244. On monarchical rule and the participation of all in “Christic kingship,” see Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 249.
 37. Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 263.
 38. Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 285; Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 183.
 39. On the place of education in this political arrangement, see Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 182–183; Milbank, “Liberality versus Liberalism,” 249; and Milbank and Pabst, *Politics of Virtue*, 260–266, 286–294.
 40. Milbank develops this notion of “complex” or “gothic” space in his essay “On Complex Space,” in Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 268–292.
 41. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 57.
 42. *Ibid.*, 107, 190. See also Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 86–88; 158–159; and especially 210–211; and Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 276–277.
 43. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 436–437.
 44. Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 271.
 45. Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 161. See Milbank’s distinction between hierarchy of this kind and that fixed within modern bureaucracies (176–177). See also 195–198, 210–213. See also Milbank, *Vico Part I*, 239.
 46. See John Milbank, “Were the ‘Christian Socialists’ Socialists?” in *The Future of Love*, 63–74; and Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 162–186.
 47. Related to this is Milbank’s argument that the “unity” of socially harmonious communities must be understood not as an entity or substance, but a *relation*. As he puts it, “Unity . . . ceases to be anything hypostatically real in contrast to difference, and becomes instead only the ‘subjective’ apprehension of a harmony displayed in the order of the differences” (Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 435–436). For Milbank, this peaceful relation of difference is one of “analogical” relation, wherein there exists a commonness or “common measure” between differences that does not figure them with respect to a “third thing,” some generic essence they share, to which various differences are ordered by univocal mediation. Rather various differences are ordered to one another in charity in generous attribution and truthful proportion, an “aesthetic relation.”
 48. Kenneth Surin argues such hierarchies are, in fact, intrinsic to the tradition of analogical thinking RO draws upon. In such a vision, charitable and peaceful relations of difference are only possible, Surin maintains, within an ontological “chain of being,” that necessitates certain forms of subjection and mastery. See 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. Creston Davis, et al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 240–266.

49. Speaking of the church, Milbank writes, “[C]ontrary to all the assumptions of secular sovereignty, it is all the more democratic the more it is genuinely hierarchical. Moreover . . . this is the only possible real democracy, and the most extremely democratic” (Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 108).
50. That is, in “the likelihood that a relatively well educated—morally trained and informed—populace will be better able to sift and refine proposals as to what is ‘best’ for them by genuinely ‘aristocratic’ thinkers and innovators at every level” (Milbank and Pabst, *Politics of Virtue*, 191).
51. Nowhere is this more evident than in Milbank’s discussion of what he calls the “beast-angel,” the human’s ever-deepening into its own natural constitution, a desire-driven movement of creative ecstasy that expresses and draws deeper into God’s love and creativity (Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 209, 221–222).
52. On RO’s extra-democratic justification of democracy, see Milbank, “Liberality versus Liberalism”, 245; and Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 239–240.
53. Milbank and Pabst, *Politics of Virtue*, 137–171; and John Milbank, “The Real Third Way: For a New Metanarrative of Capital and the Associationist Alternative,” in *The Crisis of Global Capitalism: Pope Benedict XVI’s Social Encyclical and the Future of Political Economy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 27–70.
54. Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 165. See also, Milbank, “Liberality versus Liberalism,” 250–253.
55. Milbank, “Liberality versus Liberalism,” 248.
56. Of central importance are the works of Luigino Bruni and Stefano Zamagni, as well as Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*.
57. Milbank and Pabst, *Politics of Virtue*, 129–176. See also, Adrian Pabst, “‘Civil Economy’: Blue Labour’s Alternative to Capitalism,” in *Blue Labour: Forging a New Politics*, ed. Ian Geary and Adrian Pabst (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 97–119.
58. Milbank and Pabst, *Politics of Virtue*, 142–147.
59. See Milbank’s discussion of contracts, much indebted to Edmund Burke, as a convention natural to the sociality of humanness in Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 183. Regarding natural conventions, see Jonathan Tran, “Linguistic Theology: Completing Postliberalism’s Linguistic Task,” *Modern Theology* 33:1 (2017): 47–68.
60. Milbank and Pabst, *Politics of Virtue*, 143–145.
61. Milbank, “Liberality versus Liberalism,” 263.
62. Milbank often turns to John Darwin’s work, including *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (London: Penguin Books, 2012).
63. Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 269.
64. For an overview of Blue Labour’s political vision, see Adrian Pabst, “Introduction: Blue Labour and the Politics of the Common Good,” in *Blue Labour*, 1–10.
65. To get a sense of the implications of Blue Labour’s vision, see Jon Cruddas’ April 23, 2018 *New Statesman* piece, “The Humanist Left Must Challenge the Rise of Cyber Socialism.”
66. Particularly the work of London Citizens and the Industrial Areas Foundation. See chapter 2, “Faith and Citizenship in a World City,” in Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 57–75.
67. Luke Bretherton, “Vision, Virtue, and Vocation: Notes on Blue Labour as a Practice of Politics,” in *Blue Labour*, 217–233. See also Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 111–176.
68. Bretherton, “Vision, Virtue, and Vocation,” 217.

69. We note, in this regard, how Milbank concludes his contribution to the edited volume *Blue Labour: Forging a New Politics*, for it betrays the way Milbank's project of Christendom stands at odds with the Blue Labour vision (John Milbank, "The Blue Labour Dream," in *Blue Labour*, 43–46). Milbank argues Blue Labour must recover a renewed appreciation of the British imperial legacy, which, he believes, better accommodates difference than homogeneous nation-states. A plain reading of the history of Britain's colonial enterprise seems, however, to suggest otherwise. Moreover, Glasman and Bretherton explicitly articulate Blue Labour as an *anti*-imperialist politics, wherein the turn to pluralist, participatory politics is precisely a rejection of politics as an imperial project.
70. Milbank, "The Blue Labour Dream", 43, 44, and 45.
71. Gerard Loughlin, "Christianity at the End of the Story or the Return of the Master-Narrative," *Modern Theology* 8:4 (1992), 365–384 (381).

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