
INTRODUCTION

John Milbank opens his book, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, with an unexpected comment: “Once there was no secular.”¹ Of course, part of the reason such a claim may come as a surprise is due to how we have been schooled into thinking we implicitly know what constitutes the secular. In claiming that the secular did not always exist, Milbank is suggesting that a space had to be carved out for its invention. The secular has not always been a domain, an entity, or a thing. To grant the secular a space is to suggest that there is an arena free from God. For Christians, this borders on the nihilistic as such a realm cannot exist. Such a place is nothingness. The secular, at least within Christianity, exists as a time between times. It is that moment, or series of moments, between the fall and the eschaton where creation awaits, and participates in, its anticipated redemption. There is no space or domain that is the secular; there is only the time between the fall and the restoration of creation.

Unfortunately, however, our politics, ethics, and aesthetics, that is, our varied forms of life, are greatly determined by this recently invented space. Much of what constitutes the Radical Orthodoxy movement, of which Milbank’s work is a principal catalyst, is the ability to properly name the creation of the secular as a domain that seeks to be free from the “prejudices” of religious determination. The Enlighten-

¹ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 9.

ment sought to free (or create) the individual from the constraints of church, mosque, and temple, in order to liberate (or, again, create) the autonomous self who is only answerable to the self. The individual's self-rule, however, would be short-lived as the very political body that created the individual self, and legitimates its rule, demands total allegiance. Due to the advent of the nation-state, a transference of allegiance from religion to the nation-state occurred. In order to legitimize this transference, religion had to be privatized, relativized, and de-politicized in order for the nation-state to claim ownership of the recently liberated individual.

There have been a number of reactions to the recent privatization and relativization of Christianity. Many Christians refuse to separate their religious convictions from the political arena—or, for that matter, any other arena. They reject the notion that religion should be sequestered to the private realm. A person's religious beliefs and practices should be the principal narrator of all activities. This extends, for example, to politics, music, art, and friendship. The Christian's understanding of God, and all that flows from this understanding, becomes the principal narrative that attempts to navigate her in all aspects of life. Though we are comprised of various communities that shape and form our identity, Christianity, under this rubric, is the grand narrative.

Many Radical Reformers, however, are hesitant about this response due to the concerted effort of some Christians to not only make their religious commitments public, but to utilize their religious convictions in order to rule non-Christian body-politics. This kind of Christianity often assumes that it is up to us to ensure that history comes out "right." This is the eschatological heresy often referred to as Constantinianism. Constantinianism is problematic not because it refuses to privatize Christianity, but because it confuses the politics of the church with the politics of the world. The drive within Constantinianism is to make the world Christian by harnessing some manner of control and power so that the world cannot be anything other than the kingdom of God. Yet, the god that ends up being revealed through this strategy must, of necessity, become a tribal god. Constantinians wed their faith commitments with their commitments to the state,

and. in doing so, practice a religion of the empire that establishes a god of a different kind of nation than the timeless and nomadic nation that is the church.

The flip side of the Constantinian response is simply the more “liberal” response that urges the complete separation of religion from publicly embodied life. Religion has its place, but not in the public realm. Those Christians who find themselves in positions of power must rule, during their work hours, without any bias stemming from their religious beliefs. From John F. Kennedy to John Kerry, their convictions about the Son of God (especially as understood within a Catholic context) have no bearing, we are told, on the decisions they will make for the good of the commonwealth.² Jesus very well may have been raised from the dead, but such a conviction has no place in the public realm where decisions must be made for those who both believe and reject such a claim. Religion must, for the sake of the common good, be kept private. One may believe that God exists and that this God will judge the living and the dead, but such convictions must not influence public policy.

For the descendants of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist tradition, both approaches are problematic. It was the Radical Reformers who severely criticized the fusion of church and state, and demanded a separation of the two. This separation, however, was not intended to be at the expense of depoliticizing Christianity. Their intention was not to privatize their convictions; rather, it was to make them visible. This kind of Christianity, ultimately, rejects both of the so-called liberal and conservative approaches to Christian witness in a post-Christian order. Neither posture is helpful, for both make certain assumptions indebted to a particular epoch, modernity, that has reshaped our imaginations as to what we think constitutes the secular. It is on this point, among many others, that we may find important friends within the Radical Orthodoxy movement.

Of course, the Radical Orthodoxy movement refers to much more

² Of course, this was, for Constantinian Christians, a strike against these politicians. Perhaps, however, what was really driving these politician’s comments was not derivative of them being liberal, as much as they were concerned about losing the Protestant vote.

than these specific political concerns. The term “radical orthodoxy” refers to a number of things including a return to creedal Christianity. For many Anabaptists (and much of mainstream liberal Protestantism), there is no greater anathema than the thought of returning to the creeds. Such a notion reeks of a return to Constantinianism and is, therefore, met with reluctance. Yet, the reasons for this return on the part of Radical Orthodoxy adherents, as well their attempted recovery of patristic and medieval theology, is their contention that we have lost valuable resources for how to think and live well during this time between times. A significant part of what we have inculcated since the advent of modernity betrays a theology that remains indebted to the kind of ideologies that render it difficult to speak and think in any terms outside of this secularizing and totalizing framework. For instance, following Augustine’s account of knowledge as divine illumination, the Radical Orthodox theologians attempt to transcend “the modern bastard dualisms of faith and reason, grace and nature” that so heavily dictate much of our recent theological conversations.³ Much of what we assume to be natural distinctions are really creations of a theology perverted by modern thought. By naming these dualisms as fictitious, practitioners of Radical Orthodoxy hope to better “criticize modern society, culture, politics, art, science, and philosophy with an unprecedented boldness.”⁴ Such critique is not an end in itself, but seeks to reveal how modernity destroys the very things it claims to celebrate: self-expression, sexuality, politics, and aesthetics. It is destructive of these various elements of the embodied life as secularity refuses the transcendence necessary to interrupt and suspend their relative worth over and against the void.⁵

If there is anything that we have in common with those within the Radical Orthodoxy movement, it is the attempt to live as faithfully as possible during this in-between time. We must raise questions that explore the meaning of how Christians are to be differently ethical and differently political. What does such difference look like in terms

³ John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

of our publicly-embodied lives? What does self-expression, aesthetics, art, music, and our desires look like when we reject the modern bifurcations of nature and grace as well as, in particular, the sacred and the profane? This reader functions as an attempt to address these questions.

Though there are many important differences between these two movements, some of which will be highlighted in this book, the one important commonality between the two revolves around how Christians are to seek to live in the here and the now in light of both our past and our future. Though the answer that some of the adherents of Radical Orthodoxy give may not always coincide with the Radical Reformers, the fact that they are raising these questions is a resource we would do well not to ignore.

