Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: from participation to late modernity

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‘Once, there was no “secular”.’ This is the opening statement of John Milbank’s Theology and Social Theory. This book, launched with this sentence, is often cited as the beginning of the theological sensibility which has since become known as Radical Orthodoxy. During the almost twenty years since the publication of Milbank’s groundbreaking work, Radical Orthodoxy has arguably become the most discussed and provocative tendency in Anglophone theology. Given that works in the Radical Orthodoxy genre are often ambitious in scope and purpose, engaging with classical, mediaeval, modern and late modern thought in order to read theologically the signs of our own times, the territory is vast. This introduction will provide an initial overview of some key themes before we engage with Radical Orthodoxy face to face. I am going to use John Milbank’s introductory claim – that ‘once, there was no “secular”’ – as my own starting point. So what does it mean to state that there was once no secular, and how is Milbank’s opening remark unfolded in a theology which claims to be radical and orthodox?

The invention of the secular

That we live in a secular society – particularly, but of course by no means exclusively, in western Europe and North America – is often taken for granted.
We are very familiar with journalists telling us that Europe is post-Christian with regular church attendance in inexorable decline, while the US, despite having by far the highest incidence of religious belief and practice in the West, constitutionally separates politics and religion. We might understand a secular society as one in which the public realms of politics, business and the law lack any reference to God or the transcendent. What residues of religious practice and common prayer remain in politics or the public sphere are merely faint echoes of a long forgotten world in which belief in God influenced every aspect of human living, both public and private.1 Religious practice is now thought to be confined to a private realm in which people can indulge their personal beliefs so long as those beliefs do not infringe on the (publicly defended) rights of others. As well as thinking of the secular in terms of the confinement of religion and theology to the private sphere of ‘personal belief’, we might also think that the secular refers to a shift in perspective and understanding whereby we can answer fundamental questions about nature and humanity with no reference to God or any transcendent origin or purpose.

In A Secular Age, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, in a work which is in many ways highly consonant with writings in the Radical Orthodoxy sphere, suggests a third way in which we might understand the secular, namely with reference to the shift from a situation in which belief in God is the largely unchallenged governing principle of human life and understanding to a situation in which belief in God is simply one option amongst many others.2 It becomes just another ‘world view’. As Taylor points out, this suggests that, despite high levels of religious participation, the United States exemplifies the secular: religion becomes a consumer product amongst many others with countless ‘retailers’ peddling their version of God in a free market.

In the debate surrounding secularism’s origins and identity, most are agreed that, even though the seeds were sown centuries ago, it is relatively recent in our intellectual history and is part of the birth modernity. In the high mediaeval period in much of Europe, up to around the turn of the fifteenth century, all political and social practices were orientated around Christian feasts and fasts, the division of land into ecclesiastical parishes understood primarily as communities of prayer, and the rule of a monarch under God.3 There was a shared conviction that the social body was ordered in and through the body of Christ, the Church. Nature and human society were understood to be bound together as creatures before God.4 Of course, in practice this was no utopia – the world is, of course, fallen – but it was a society of worship which believed that violence and suffering were not the natural state of man (as modern political theorists were later to suggest) but an intrusion, and that common peace and flourishing were to be sought through hope and participation in ‘divine society’.

Historians, sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers and theologians have offered countless explanations for the extraordinary shift from what is sometimes known as ‘the mediaeval consensus’ to the modern secular world. One of the more straightforward and popular accounts of the demise of the mediaeval consensus and the advent of secular modernity refers to the rise of natural science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. What is this account of secular modernity’s establishment? To understand it properly, we must return to the mediaeval West and the influence of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 bc).

Following the introduction of his works into the Latin West from the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries (via the Islamic philosophers of northern Spain), a version of the philosophy of Aristotle had gradually become dominant in Europe. His works formed the basis of the curricula in the new universities, and his natural philosophy, refracted through Christian theology, heavily influenced the way people thought about their relations with each other and their place in creation. Crucially, however, while Aristotle advocated the observation of nature in order to describe its workings, he did not advocate what we now call experimental science. Experiments do not involve simply the observation of nature; they involve the isolation, control and manipulation of natural processes in order to measure outcomes. Performing experiments allowed natural philosophers (the term ‘scientist’ came later) such as Galileo to predict and therefore manipulate natural processes much more carefully. Coupled with great advances in mathematics in the seventeenth century, this gave the first natural scientists such as Newton the tools to discover the supposed facts about nature.

This provokes the characteristically modern sense that human knowledge is advancing inexorably as new discoveries are made. The old world of natural philosophy, Christian practice, the Bible and theology was being stripped away to reveal a more neutral world view which was apparently disinterested, objective and factual. While ‘reason’ of course had a prominent place in earlier thought as a participation in the reason – the logos – of God mediated through traditions and social practices, a new understanding of reason was to dominate this Enlightenment. This rationality was not particular to any tradition or subject matter, but common to all peoples and times.5 This reason was to be dispassionate, standing independent of any cultural or historical influence.6

So the rise of the secular is understood in terms of the simultaneous retreat of religion and theology. This is sometimes referred to as ‘desacralization’. This means that the question of humanity’s (or creation’s) ultimate origin and purpose is largely sidelined in favour of questions which concern the more immediate and immanent workings and functions of human beings and nature. Questions about the facts of nature were now divorced from questions of value or purpose.
This view of the transformation from the mediaeval consensus to the modern secular world is so straightforward that we often take it for granted. It is a view which sees the secular as the result of clearing away the debris of superstition, ritual and tradition which we imagine dominated mediaeval Europe to open new possibilities directed by the neutral hand of reason expressed most particularly in the natural sciences. The advent of the secular is therefore seen as the natural result of the inevitable progress of human knowledge and thinking.

As Milbank unfolds his opening claim that ‘once, there was no secular’, we see that he rejects this view of the emergence of the secular from the ruins of the mediaeval consensus. Why? Milbank argues that the secular is not simply that which is left behind once we have rid ourselves of religion and theology. The secular is not a neutral, dispassionate or objective view of ourselves and the world; it had to be created as a positive ideology. The secular view holds its own assumptions and prejudices concerning human society and nature which are no more objective or justifiable than those of the ancient and mediaeval philosophers and theologians.

The secular as a domain had to be instituted or imagined, both in theory and in practice. This institution is not correctly grasped in merely negative terms as a desacralization. It belongs to the received wisdom of sociology to interpret Christianity as itself an agent of sacralization, yet this thesis is totally bound up with the one-sided negativity of the notion of desacralizing; a metaphor of the removal of the superfluous and additional to leave a residue of the human, the natural and the self-sufficient.

So Milbank’s crucial point is that the secular is not simply the rolling back of a theological consensus to reveal a neutral territory where we all become equal players, but the replacement of a certain view of God and creation with a different view which still makes theological claims, that is, claims about origins, purpose and transcendence. The problem is that this ‘mock-theology’ or ‘pseudo-theology’ is bad theology. Secularism is, quite literally, a Christian heresy – an ideological distortion of theology.

So we have a different picture: in the vacuum created by the confinement of God to the margins of human society and self-understanding in the period we call ‘modernity’ or ‘the Enlightenment’, something would enter to fill the void as a new theology in disguise. In other words, there would be some kind of transcendent principle or overarching narrative framework for understanding natural and cultural processes which would replace the mediaeval consensus. Milbank’s key focus is on power as that which becomes the governing principle of modern thought. The forces of nature and the forces of society – whether in the hands of a Newtonian, Darwinian, Nietzschean, Marxist or capitalist – are now understood as governed by competing claims to, or expressions of, power. To the extent that God was residually present in the new modern discourses of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, he was now an agent of power amongst other agents, albeit one with a newly conceived absolute power (potentia absoluta) which he could wilfully wield as a supplement to his ordinary power (potentia ordinata), this latter being, as it were, for everyday use.

To refer to power is, however, only part of the story. Of course, pre-modern thought was much concerned with political and cosmic power. For Milbank, what changes in secular modernity is the context in which theories of power are articulated. Whereas the Christian theological understanding of creation understood peace to be ‘ontologically basic’ in expression of the eternal peaceful difference in the Trinity, now society and nature are understood to be characterized by an essential violence which must be controlled and tamed by the exercise of power. Creation comes to be seen as primordially or originally violent.

Christianity, however, recognizes no original violence. It construes the infinite not as chaos, but as a harmonic peace which is yet beyond the circumscribing power of any totalizing reason. Peace no longer depends on the reduction to the self-identical, but is the sociality of harmonious difference. Violence, by contrast, is always a secondary willed intrusion upon this possible infinite order (which is actual for God).

Of course it is the case that the mediaeval world knew much of violence and conflict, but, particularly following St Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430), these were understood as intrusions into a created order in which peace is ontologically basic. Proper society was one which reflected such primordial peace. By contrast, in modern thought violence and conflict are seen to be basic characteristics of society and nature which we tame by the competitive exercise of power and the reduction of all differences to uniformity. God becomes just another agent of power – albeit a very powerful agent – in the project of enforcing peace.

An important concept which arises in the short quotation from Milbank above is ‘difference’. This reflects very clearly the character of Neoplatonic understandings of the order of the Church, society and cosmos which have heavily influenced Radical Orthodoxy’s diagnosis of the character of modernity. For those prior to modernity who write in the broad tradition of Christian theology influenced by Neoplatonic thought, cosmos, Church and society are understood to be composed of a hierarchy of harmonious differences of natures, talents, characters, wills, desires and so on. This tradition receives perhaps its most influential expression in the works of the eastern Christian mystic Dionysius the Pseudo Areopogite (c. AD 500), The Celestial Hierarchy and The Ecclesiastical...
Hierarchies. For Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64), who is perhaps the last mediaeval representative of Christian Neoplatonism, hierarchy was crucial because it embodied the difference of talents, skills, characters and so on, which should compose any body whose parts are mutually enhancing, whether it be the body of Christ (following the imagery given to us by St Paul in, for example, Romans 12.5 and 1 Corinthians 12.12-27), the social and political body, or the whole cosmic hierarchy. Within the hierarchical social or ecclesial body, an individual found a role, place and identity and, as such, was set free to be a particular person within a social or ecclesial whole. One’s personal identity was understood more as a gift than a matter of the invention of the individual will. Similarly, within the cosmic hierarchy creatures find a place and identity. Each of these hierarchical unities was, crucially, more than the sum of its parts and just as real as any particular member of the whole. The identity of any individual member of the hierarchy was constituted in relation to other members. The celestial body was understood to be a real whole – genuinely a uni-verse, rather than simply a collection of individual things.

But every concordance is made up of differences. And the less opposition there is among these differences, the greater the concordance and the longer the life. And therefore life is everlasting where there is no opposition [that is, eternal peace]. On this basis you can perceive the basic principles of the most holy Trinity and Unity because it is a unity in trinity and a trinity in unity, and there is no opposition internally since whatever the Father is, so also are the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, the ecclesial, social or cosmic hierarchies are not to be understood as ‘top-down’ with the those at the top distant from those at the bottom. God was understood by Nicholas of Cusa to be equally present to every point in the hierarchy: ‘Thus one God is all things in all things.’ We also tend to think of hierarchy as necessarily authoritarian and the embodiment of inequality. In the end, for a thinker such as Cusa there was only one fundamental, irreducible difference within the hierarchy, namely that between God and creation. However structured, authoritarian or differentiated the cosmic, social or ecclesial hierarchies might be, all are united as creatures before God. Humanity, as uniquely created in the imago dei, enjoys a collective equality before God. Moreover, for Cusa the more complex a hierarchy the more it contains within itself checks and balances in relation to power. Different parts of the political, ecclesial or cosmic body balance each other and ensure a measure of equality. To the extent that hierarchies become simple and ‘flat’, the opportunity for the accumulation and abuse of power in just one part of the hierarchy duly emerges.
which minimize any potential source of disagreement, or at least manage its occasional appearance. Put simply, if what we mean by ‘reason’ and ‘truth’ does not depend on one’s particular perspective, circumstances, background or history, but is a matter of objective and dispassionate indifference, disagreement simply should not arise. Thus Isaac Newton, David Hume and other key figures of the British Enlightenment were notorious for their abhorrence of disagreement. A culture of ‘civility’ arose in the form of a code of practice for the manufacture of matters of scientific fact which was designed to minimize the effects of ‘difference’. The result was an intellectual culture which admitted to its membership only those of very particular social backgrounds, training and persuasion. Writing of the controversy between the seventeenth-century philosopher and political theorist Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and the natural philosopher Robert Boyle (1627–91), Stephen Shapin and Simon Schaffer comment that ‘Managed dissent within the moral community of experimentalists was safe. Uncontrollable divisiveness and civil war followed from any other course.’

Hobbes is perhaps the clearest example of a political theorists who understands violent conflict to emerge from a differentiated social body. In his great work Leviathan, published in 1651, Hobbes is struck by the natural state of conflict and self-interest which pertains between individuals. He calls this the ‘state of nature’. Hobbes does not mean that we are naturally selfish and lack any degree of altruism. His point is that, without government, there is no reason to act in any way other than to preserve one’s own self-interest, most probably by violence. How, then, does one avoid the conflictual ‘state of nature’? Hobbes argues that the only rational approach is to establish a social contract in which law (the courts) and violence (the armed forces) – the tools of protection – are handed over to a central, sovereign power, whether it be a monarch or government. That sovereign authority promises to keep peace through coercion in the form of law and punishment. Social relations are now mediated through politics, the law and economics, all made possible by the contract with the central, sovereign power. Religion becomes an entirely private matter and, indeed, the Church becomes a department of state and subject to the regulative and jurisdictional power of the sovereign. Leviathan swallows the Church.

Whether in the theological, political or natural scientific spheres, the modern period therefore regards ‘difference’ as politically and socially dangerous. It is the harbinger of violence and conflict, hence the need to ‘flatten’ difference. Milbank contrasts this modern opposition to difference with the theological understanding of creation as based on a supreme and peaceful harmony which is difference itself – namely the Trinity. Here we see an infinite and eternal difference which, because it is difference, is also harmonious unity (rather just a monadic ‘thing’). In being an effect of this eternal harmonious unity, creation also exhibits a unity-in-difference, albeit faintly and analogously. In Milbank’s work this leads to a critique of those modern forms of social thought which seek the flattening of difference and the violent imposition of peace understood as nominalistic uniformity. Difference is ontologically basic within creation and the character of the harmonious good. This is seen particularly in the visible realm in the differentiated body of the Church, the blend of harmonious gifts into a whole which is as real as its individual members.

In asserting the ontological priority of peace rather than violence, it is important to recognize the extent to which Milbank and those who have written under the Radical Orthodoxy banner are at this point reasserting an ancient doctrine of creation which is at once shared with the Jewish and Islamic traditions: first, that God creates ex nihilo, and secondly that evil has no positive foothold in being, but is rather the privation of the Good. Why are these important?

In his cosmological treatise Timaeus, Plato expounds a creation myth in which a demiurge orders a pre-existent chaos according to the eternal pattern of the Forms. Plato’s successor Aristotle claimed that the cosmos is of everlasting time, and involves the bringing of order from chaos by means of desire for a final good. This ancient Greek cosmology, which had a huge influence on the later Christian doctrine of creation, nevertheless differed in one crucial respect from Judeo-Christian (and later Islamic) understandings of God’s creative act: for the latter tradition, God creates from nothing. In other words, God does not have to master a pre-existent chaos. There is no primordial assertion of power or will by the divine. Unlike our acts of ‘making’, God is not constrained by any pre-existent material, and there is no ‘before’ and ‘after’ to God’s creation (for God creates the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of time itself). The act of creation is a pure donation in expression of the infinite gratuity of God. It is therefore not an act of violent imposition upon a pre-existent chaos, but an act of pure peaceful donation. Within the theological tradition, the doctrine of creation ex nihilo is developed first as a doctrine of God: creation is an expression of God’s sovereign, peaceful freedom. For the Christian tradition, the difference between God and creation inscribes the difference which lies at the heart of being itself, namely the Trinity.

Parallel to the view of creation ex nihilo is the clearly Platonic and Augustinian notion that what is ontologically primary is the Good. Evil is not something in itself, but only the absence of the Good, just as darkness is not something in itself, but merely the absence of light. St Augustine rejected the Gnostic and Manichean cosmology which understood good and evil to be on a kind of ontic plane of reality competing for power. So any dualism of good and evil is rejected. It must be stressed that this is not a view of how we experience evil. Certainly we experience evil as powerful and real. It is, rather, a metaphysical view which recognizes that, before there can be evil, there must
be the Good. This is to say that evil is entirely parasitic on the Good; it is a lack, or absence, of the Good, and therefore it is not something in itself. A chemical weapons silo, for example, is privative for it represents the absence of that which is primordial, intelligible, abiding and therefore real: true sociality and peaceableness.

Radical Orthodoxy contends that the Platonic–Augustinian doctrine of the primacy of the Good is replaced in modernity with a view that evil and violence are somehow primordial and have a share in reality. In other words, evil is reified; it is turned into something alongside the Good. To the extent that this view of creation was already present in the ancient world in the form of a Gnostic and Manichean cosmology rejected by the ancient Church under the heavy influence of Augustine and the Platonic tradition, then modernity and secularism do not look quite so new. However, the Church was able to resist the tendency to think that evil is something, or that the cosmos features a fundamental duality of good and evil. How was it able to do so, and what changed so that our understanding of creation and our place therein became so focused on violence and power in the form of a pseudo-theology? It is Radical Orthodoxy’s contention that the shift in understanding is first and foremost theological; it is a change in the doctrine of God.

This leads us directly to one of Radical Orthodoxy’s most important questions. If God had to be pushed to one side in order to be replaced by a fundamentally different and pseudo-theological understanding of human society and nature, how did this happen? What changed in our understanding of God such that God could be marginalized in our thoughts and practices? Those who have written under the banner of Radical Orthodoxy argue, along with many other twentieth-century theologians and philosophers, that it is modernity and secularism that are responsible. However, we also need to examine the understanding of God towards the beginning of his great Summa Theologiae (1a.13) written in the 1260s. How, for Aquinas, can we speak of God? In answering this question, Aquinas is not providing us with a theory of language which we might then deploy to understand how this happened, we need to examine the understanding of God in the context of his great Summa Theologiae written in the 1260s. So prior to the rise of the secular, those who have written under the banner of Radical Orthodoxy argue, along with many other twentieth-century theologians and philosophers, that it is modernity and secularism that are responsible for the shift in understanding of God.

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**Analogy and participation**

It is not at all obvious that we are able to speak of God. Why? Because our words are orientated towards finite things – the natural world, human beings and so on – and using those same words to refer to the infinity of God would surely stretch them beyond breaking point. Whenever we speak about God we seem to use words more properly suited to creatures. Such speech must surely be futile, for God infinitely exceeds any thought or conception we might have of him. Yet we do speak about God, whether in schools, universities, seminaries or the liturgy of the Church. This observation – that we apparently cannot speak of God and yet we do speak of God – is the beginning of St Thomas Aquinas’s consideration of theological language and the naming of God towards the beginning of his great Summa Theologiae (1a.13) written in the 1260s. How, for Aquinas, can we speak of God? In answering this question, Aquinas is not providing us with a theory of language which we might then deploy in speaking about God. Rather, he is beginning with some comments about how we happily get on with the business of speaking about God in prayer and worship.

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One of the most obvious ways in which we speak of God is figuratively or metaphorically. The Bible is replete with metaphorical speech about God, for example when we say that ‘God is my rock’. We might understand metaphor in a number of ways, but most generally it should be observed that metaphors are literally false (God is not literally a rock). Yet they certainly carry a weight of truth which we would struggle to express in purely literal speech. Metaphorical speech, in already being somewhat indirect and tentative, does not seem to present us with such an acute problem when used to refer to God for there is no pretence to be speaking literally or directly. Yet we clearly speak of God using more than metaphor. It is surely not straightforwardly metaphorical to call God ‘good’ or ‘wise’. So how else might we speak of God?

There are two ways of speaking of God which Aquinas dismisses for a number of reasons. The first suggests that, when we make statements such as ‘God is good’, what we mean is simply that God is the cause of goodness. In other words, God is good because he causes goodness in others. This, however, is problematic: God is also the cause of bodies, yet God is not a body. Also, in claiming that ‘God is good’ means only that ‘God causes goodness’, the implication is that goodness belongs primarily to creatures, and only secondarily to God as the cause of that goodness. Aquinas avoids this approach because he wishes to maintain that goodness belongs primarily to God. Alternatively, we might think that when we speak of God we do so negatively. So when we say God is good we are not suggesting that we have any positive purchase on what it is for God to be good; we are merely saying that ‘God is not evil’. Broadly speaking, this is the basis of what is sometimes known as ‘negative’ or ‘apophatic’ theology. At one level, Aquinas is deeply attracted to this tradition which refers to God not by a process of positive ascription, but by negating our conception of God due to its infinite inadequacy. However, Aquinas’s reason for not opting wholeheartedly for the so-called via negativa is that in some instances we do speak of God positively, and we apparently mean what we say. So how might we best make sense of this positive speech about God?

Pursuing this question, Aquinas begins by pointing out that the words that we use of God might be deployed equivocally or univocally. When we ‘equivocate’, we use what is apparently the same word but in utterly unrelated ways. For example, we might refer to ‘river bank’ and ‘high street bank’, thus using the word ‘bank’ equivocally to the point where we might wonder whether we are, in any meaningful sense, using the same word. When we use words ‘univocally’ – literally ‘with one voice’ – the use is identical. For example, we might refer to ‘John’s wisdom’ and ‘Peter’s wisdom’, using the word ‘wisdom’ univocally. For Aquinas, when we speak of God we do not equivocate, but neither do we speak univocally. When we say ‘God is good’ and ‘Samuel is good’ we are using the word ‘good’ neither equivocally (in completely different senses) nor univocally (in identical senses). We are not speaking univocally because what it means for God to be good is not what it means for Samuel to be good, even though Samuel’s goodness might be an expression of, or a faint reflection of, divine goodness. Does this suggest that there is an intermediate path between equivocation and univocation?

That middle path is known as analogy. When we speak of God, we do so analogically. What does this mean? There are numerous theories of analogy which might meet Aquinas’s needs in describing the way in which we speak of God, but we will consider those two which seem to have been most prominent in thirteenth century thought. The first is known as ‘analogy of proper proportion’. On this view, when we speak analogically we do so in terms of two ratios or proportions. Thus we might say that ‘as sight is to the body, so is the intellect to the soul’. This is a comparison of two relations (sight to body and intellect to soul) and might be expressed in terms of a mathematical proportion. For example, we might say that ‘as 3 is to 2, so 6 is to 4’.

Is this satisfactory? No, and for two important reasons. First, if God is infinite, he cannot be subject to any meaningful ratio or proportion (as Nicholas of Cusa, the last representative of the Neoplatonic mediaeval consensus, made clear in the fifteenth century). Moreover, if God is to be subject to a proportion which can be compared to a proportion between two created things, this implies that God is essentially like creatures, only infinitely bigger. As we will see shortly, this presents serious problems. The second reason why analogy of proportion is problematic is because it seems to deal in identities or tautologies. In terms of the mathematical proportion mentioned above, 3 divided by 2 simply is 6 divided by 4. We appear to be saying the same thing twice rather than placing two different relations together in a revealing way.

Although Aquinas does seem to discuss analogy of proper proportion in the Summa Theologicae, he clearly opts for what might better be described as analogy of attribution. How does this differ from analogy of proper proportion? Imagine that you eat wholegrain bread for breakfast. We might call such bread ‘healthy’. It is not, however, healthy in itself; it is called healthy by virtue of its relation to you because it makes you healthy. There is thus an analogy between healthy bread and a healthy human being. A human being is healthy in himself or herself, and health is attributed to the bread because it makes the human being healthy. The bread is not healthy in itself, but only by virtue of its relation to the person who eats it. Likewise, we might talk of a ‘healthy complexion’. This is not healthy in itself, but is a sign of healthliness in someone. Similarly, we say that God is good in himself. I am good not in myself, but by virtue of my relation to God, for God enables me to be good and, in being a creature of God, I am a sign of God’s goodness. Aquinas would say that the principal focus of
the term ‘good’ is God, and all other things are analogously referred to as ‘good’ by virtue of their relation to this principal focus.

This way of using words lies somewhere between pure equivocation and simple univocity, for the word is neither used in the same sense, as with univocal usage, nor in totally different senses, as with equivocation. The several senses of a word used analogically signify different relations to some one thing (diversas proportiones ad aliquid unum), as ‘health’ in a complexion means a symptom of health in a man, and in a diet means a cause of that health.27

There is, therefore, an analogy between my goodness and God’s goodness whereby goodness is attributed to me by virtue of my relation to God.26 It is not the case that goodness is attributed to me simply because God causes my goodness (Aquinas has already rejected this view), but rather because my goodness is a sign of God’s goodness. In my goodness one somehow sees, albeit faintly and through a sign, divine goodness. Put another way, we might say that the question is not ‘Is God good?’, but rather ‘In what sense, if at all, can I be called good?’

When we say he [God] is good or wise we do not simply mean that he causes wisdom or goodness, but that he possesses these perfections transcedently. We conclude, therefore, that from the point of view of what the word means it is used primarily of God and derivatively of creatures, for what the word means – the perfection it signifies – flows from God to the creature.29

Aquinas is here stating that perfection terms – such as good, wise, living – are predicated primarily of God and secondarily of creatures. In other words, God is these perfections in himself. We have these perfections attributed to us by virtue of our relation to God.

For Aquinas, the matter does not end here. God also exists in himself. God is said to be simple, meaning that it is of his essence to exist. Whereas creatures are composed of many aspects or parts which we might or might not possess (and are therefore ‘complex’), God is not composed in this way: God is his goodness, wisdom and so on. God is existence itself. We only have existence attributed to us by virtue of our relation to God as creator. Just as bread is not healthy in itself, neither do I exist in myself (I might, after all, not exist). Put another way, we might say that, in creatures, there is a real distinction between existence (what things are) and existence (that things are). So even existence, or ‘being’, is analogical in the sense that creaturely existence is due to a relation with the source of being itself, namely God. This is the basis of the view that later became known as the analogia entis, or the analogy of being. On this view, we only exist or have being by virtue of a relation with being itself, namely God.

However, analogy of attribution does present potential problems. On this view, only God exists in himself. To put the matter in Aristotelian terms, God is the only real substance.30 All other existents – all creatures – are merely accidental or only exist in a secondary sense. This seems to imply something like pantheism. Pantheism is often identified as the theological view that the universe is ‘God’s body’. More generally, we can identify pantheism as the view that there is only God and that creation does not exist in itself, it seems that we are forced to concede that there is only God. Creation is a chimera, just a dream. That would be pantheism.

It is at this point that John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and many others, following various Platonic and Neoplatonic readings of Aquinas, point to the crucial piece of the jigsaw which will complete the high mediaeval view of God and the concept which many see as lying at the heart of Radical Orthodoxy: the metaphysics of participation. The notion of participation extends back to Plato and is no doubt crucial to Aquinas’s view of creation’s analogical relation to God. Following Aquinas, Milbank and Pickstock claim that there are still substantial entities in creation, but only insofar as they participate in the gratuity of God’s gift of being. God bestows upon creation a finite participation in his own substantiality. In other words, creation does not have an existence by virtue of itself, but only and always because of the gratuity of God. The radical implication of this view of participation is that creation has no autonomous existence. Creation does not stand alongside God as another focus of being or existence, neither does it lie ‘outside’ God. When God creates the universe, there is not one ‘thing’ (God) and then, suddenly, two ‘things’ (God + creation).

Creatures, for Aquinas, beneath the level of patterns of granted relative necessity and subsistence, are radically accidental. But not thereby, of course, accidents of the divine substance: rather they subsist by participation in it.31

In Platonic thought, the concept of participation is used to describe the relationship between the visible realm of becoming and the realm of being represented by the Forms. The former participates in the latter and has no
autonomous existence outside this relationship, hence Radical Orthodoxy’s emphasis on participation yields a non-dualistic reading of Platonic thought. 

The visible realm of becoming does not stand alongside or in juxtaposition to the Forms in a way that might imply two foci of existence or being (dualism). Rather, the realm of the Forms and the realm of becoming are ‘interwoven’ in such a way that the visible, created realm which we inhabit perpetually ‘borrows’ existence from the Forms (and ultimately the Form of the Good) which are more real, eternal and stable. Plato uses many words to describe this relationship: *mixis* (mixture), *symplēkē* (interweaving), *kolonnia* (coupling), *mimesis* (copying), *methexis* (participation). All of these preclude any sense that the realm of becoming is autonomous.

Along with a number of other commentators, including recently Rudi te Velde and Fran O’Rourke, Milbank and Pickstock see a Neoplatonic participatory ontology at the heart not only of Aquinas’s writing on language, but of his whole theology. This is not, however, a straightforward recapitulation of Plato’s scheme. Christian theology introduces the notion of creation as a *gift* of grace. At every moment, creation is *ex nihilo*, ‘from nothing’. Its existence is a continuous and gratuitous divine donation in the form of an ‘improper’ participation in God’s own substantiality. This participation is improper in the simple sense that it is not *proper* to creation. In other words, there is no sense in which creation has a self-subsistent ‘right’ to existence; at all times, creation ‘is’ only because of the gratuity of God.

Participation therefore avoids what might otherwise be a risk in understanding creation’s relation to God through analogy of attribution, namely the pantheistic view that the only really subsisting thing is God. Participation asserts that creation is real, but it also asserts that creation’s reality is not autonomous, but is a constantly arriving gracious gift of self-subsistent being, namely God. Creation is not simply a ‘given’; it is ‘gift’. A corollary of this is that creation *ex nihilo* does not refer to some kind of primordial temporal instant where God simply willed everything into being and stood aside. At every moment, creation is *ex nihilo*.

The view that there are not two foci of being, and that creation has no self-subsisting autonomy but only exists by God’s gift of participation in his own substantiality, is echoed in various ways throughout the corpus of Radical Orthodoxy writings. This doctrine of God and creation even governs the properly theological understanding of the relationship between human discourses such as theology, philosophy and the sciences.

Participation, however, refuses any reserve of created territory, while allowing finite things their own integrity. Underpinning the present essays (in the collection *Radical Orthodoxy*), therefore, is the idea that every discipline must be framed by a theological perspective; otherwise these disciplines will define a zone apart from God, grounded literally in nothing.

How can this be so? Let us begin with theology whose subject matter is God and all things in relation to God. In so far as *everything* is fundamentally related to God (according to the metaphysics of participation, nothing created is wholly autonomous or self-standing), we might follow Aquinas and stipulate that theology therefore has no specific subject matter because nothing is autonomous from God. Theology could be about anything, because everything is fundamentally related to God. We could not even say that theology’s subject matter is ‘revelation’ because revelation is not itself bounded. Until the advent of modern theology, revelation is not understood as a discrete ‘thing’ or a packet of information; creation itself is revelatory of God. So in a moment of apparently outrageous temerity, we might even say that theology ‘tries to say something about everything’, for everything is related to the divine.

In contrast to theology, other discourses do have clearly delineated and mutually exclusive subject matters. History deals with the past, the natural sciences with nature, medicine with the naturalized human body, psychology with behaviour and emotion, and so on. We might say that these discourses try, however improbably, ‘to say everything about something’. Because the Christian doctrine of creation, expressed in terms of participation, stipulates that the subject matters of such discourses, because they are aspects of creation, are not autonomous from God, so neither can these discourses be autonomous from that discourse which pertains to God, namely theology. In other words, human discourses have to attend to the realization that their subject matters point beyond themselves to the transcendent. In so far as the subject matters of non-theological discourses are fundamentally related to God the creator, so those non-theological subject matters will be related to theology itself. The nature of that relation would require very careful and sophisticated articulation, but the central point for Radical Orthodoxy is that no discourse which seeks truth can count itself as wholly autonomous from issues of transcendent origin and purpose – that is, the issues of theology. However, this is most certainly not to suggest that other discourses are thereby collapsed into theology any more than it is to suggest that, within the framework of participation, creation collapses into God. We might even say that, in some sense, all human discourses ‘participate’ in theology by attending to the fundamentally created nature of their subject matters. Just as the metaphysics of participation points to the proper existence of creation which yet owes its created being at every moment to that which is being itself (God), so too the peculiar
character of non-theological discourses must be maintained while denying that those discourses are self-standing and autonomous from, or indifferent to, theological considerations.

It is to this that Milbank refers when he makes the very provocative and now oft-quoted claim that

If theology no longer seeks to position, qualify or criticize other discourses, then it is inevitable that these discourses will position theology: for the necessity of an ultimate organizing logic [that is, a ‘pseudo-] theology’ of some kind ... cannot be wished away.38

It is also the basis for Radical Orthodoxy’s refusal to admit the autonomy of any discourse, including philosophy, from theology.39 Again, it is not the case that Radical Orthodoxy has thereby turned everything into theology under different guises. The refusal of the language of autonomy is instead the refusal of the possibility of indifference to the transcendent. In other words, it is the refusal of the idea that God is in any way irrelevant to the truth of anything.

The intimate relationship between theology and other discourses also mirrors Radical Orthodoxy’s claim that faith and reason are inextricably intertwined, and that at no point does one enter a realm of faith having kicked away the ladder of reason. Why? Because having maintained that one cannot be indifferent to the transcendent — to God — one must equally maintain that one cannot be indifferent to immanence and our created nature to which belongs the reason that is peculiar to our nature. In other words, we do not see with a ‘God’s eye’ perspective as the privileged recipients of a self-contained revelation accessed by an autonomous faith, but rather always understand from the perspective of reasoning created beings. Thus theology does not sit in pristine isolation from other human discourses, particularly and most obviously that to which it is most clearly related owing to the breadth of its subject matter, namely philosophy. The consequence of this view of the nature of theology is its constant and critical engagement with other disciplines. This is why Radical Orthodoxy, from its inception, has seemed to be a very ambitious sensibility which there was no secular space — no arena devoid of reference to the divine — to a situation in which theology and religion are the marginal preserve of the credulous and weak-minded, and the pseudo-theology of secular late modernity, with all its attendant arbitrary assumptions, holds sway? It is Radical Orthodoxy’s contention that the beginnings of this shift are to be found in the forgetting of participation in the late Middle Ages and the rise of the view that there are two foci of existence sharing a common being. In other words, creation comes to be seen as existing autonomously in such way that it becomes possible to be indifferent between finite and infinite being. How did this come about?

Univocity of Being and the creation of secular space

In the generation following Aquinas, his analogical understanding of the relation between God and creation was radically recast. Radical Orthodoxy, following the lead of numerous prominent scholars of mediaeval theology and philosophy, has seen the work of John Duns Scotus (c.1265-1308) as of particular — although by no means exclusive — importance. Scotus ushered in two important moves away from the Neoplatonic—Aristotelian consensus: the univocity of being and an understanding of knowledge as representation. I will address these briefly in turn.

As we have seen, for Aquinas there is no abstract ‘being’ separate from God; the divine is ipsum esse, or ‘being itself’. In God, being and existence wholly coincide and hence God is known as one and therefore simple. Created being, or esse commune (‘being in common’) is composed in the sense that essence does not coincide with existence; any creature might not be, and thus essence (what something is) and existence (that something is) are not one but ‘mixed’. Created being exists analogically because being is predicated primarily of God (God is being) and is attributed to creatures by participation. There are myriad implications of this understanding of the relation between finite and infinite which will be explored later in this Reader. For now it is important to note that ‘being’ is not an abstract concept common to creator and creature. Rather,
This metaphysics of participation is radically rethought by Scotus in a highly complex fashion. To put things very simply, Scotus conceives God and creatures as falling under a common concept of ‘being’. This ‘being’ applies to finite and infinite in the same way, hence Scotus calls this concept univocal between God and creatures. For Aquinas, God and creatures are sheerly different (the former being ‘self-subsistent being’, the latter sharing mysteriously in that being by ‘participation’), this later becoming known as the ‘ontological difference’. For Scotus, on the other hand, this ‘difference’ between finite and infinite is rethought. God now has a more intense and infinite being which is possessed to a lesser extent, but in essentially the same way, by creatures.

Why does this matter? Imagine that, as a creature, you wish to ‘ascend’ to God. Commencing from finite creaturely being, you begin to traverse the ‘space’ between creaturely, finite being and infinite divine being. If God’s being is now understood as infinitely greater than creaturely being but essentially the same, that space between God and creatures will itself be infinitely great. Can one traverse that infinite space between God and creatures? No, because no matter how far one travels, there will still be an infinite distance to traverse. Paradoxically, whereas we might think that placing God and creation under a single univocal concept called ‘being’ might make God less ‘other’ or less ‘distant’, the opposite occurs. An infinite quantitative ‘sea of sameness’ (that is, univocal being) is established between God and creation. The consequence of this shift in the doctrine of God is that God becomes a distant object which can only be the focus of a superstitious faith which is separate from reason.

The interpretation of Scotus on this point is controversial and complex, and the essay by Catherine Pickstock in this volume seeks to do justice to this complexity (see Chapter 4). Even where commentators nuance Scotus’s position and articulate his reasons for rejecting the metaphysics of participation and analogy of attribution in favour of some form of univocity, the valuation of this shift varies enormously. For Radical Orthodoxy, Scotus’s work marks a crucial staging post in the move towards what is often referred to as ‘the bracketing’ of God, which is characteristic of the modern period. Here, the question of God and theology becomes marginal (‘bracketed’) because God is understood to lie at the far side of an untranscendable infinite sea of being. Thus God is distant, and this distance opens up the possibility of a space for which God is largely irrelevant. This space is autonomous, self-standing and self-governed. This is the invention of the secular.

At the same time, because God is understood univocally as ‘good’ or ‘just’ in the same way as you or I might be ‘good’ or ‘just’, only infinitely more so, God comes to be understood in anthropomorphic terms as rather like an infinitely large person, a cause alongside other causes in the universe, or an object amongst other objects in the field of our attention. This is the God of modern theology and philosophy. It is the contention of Radical Orthodoxy that the God in whom people do not believe today is this God of modernity, not the God of orthodox, pre-modern Christian theology.45

Another aspect of Scotus’s thought which is rather less controversial amongst commentators concerns knowledge as representation. To what does this refer? For those prior to the fourteenth century who lie within the broad tradition of Christian Platonism, knowledge is understood in a particular way in terms of abstraction. For example, as I know a tree it is clear that the matter of the tree cannot enter my mind. However, my mind can abstract the form of the tree. The tree, as it were, ‘repeats itself’ in my intellect. My intellective soul in turn refers this abstraction to the Form or Idea of ‘tree’ – namely, what a tree truly is in the mind of God.42 Thus I know the particular object in front of me as a tree and not a boat, and as a certain tree of particular beauty. The crucial point in this rather strange understanding of knowledge is that the form of the tree really does enter the intellect of the knower, and thus knowing the tree is as much an aspect of the life of the tree as it is of the knower. Moreover, my knowledge of the tree is not just a representation of the tree; it really is the form of the tree.

For Scotus – and few would claim that this is not an important element in his thought – knowledge is understood in terms of representation. My knowledge of a tree is rather akin to my mind taking a snapshot of the tree as if my mind were a camera. So what I know is not the tree itself, but only a representation of the tree. This is significant for two reasons. First, representations can be the cause of mistrust. In other words, my representational knowledge of the tree can be called into doubt because it is only a representation – a picture or snapshot, if you like. Understood in this way, the knowledge which comes from our senses can be the object of suspicion and doubt, and hence knowledge as representation is often regarded as the beginnings of a peculiarly modern form of scepticism. A corollary of this provides the second reason why knowledge as representation in Scotus is important. Because knowledge is now somewhat problematic, the focus for philosophy shifts from what we know (in which ontology (the what) and epistemology (the knowledge) are interwoven) to how we know what we know. This therefore marks the invention of an autonomous and particular variant of philosophy which has become of almost exclusive concern in the modern period, namely epistemology – the study of how we know what we know. It also marks the point at which we can know things without what Catherine Pickstock calls ‘real ontological elevation’. Under the Platonic scheme outlined above, created beings are known by reference to the
Radical Orthodoxy therefore contends that the invention of the secular – namely, a space understood as autonomous from the transcendent, and subject matters which make no reference (or idolatrous reference) to the transcendent – begins with theological shifts many centuries ago and cannot be accounted for in terms of bald human progress or the dismantling of religion by

the force of a new science or rationality. Moreover, because the secular – in particular, modern philosophy understood as metaphysics which prioritizes being indifferent as between finite and infinite – finds its genesis in theological shifts, it cannot diagnose either the nature of its own beginnings or the solution to its own problems. Hence, as Milbank so provocatively claims, ‘only theology overcomes metaphysics’. Does this therefore suggest a nostalgic return to the theology and politics of the high middle ages? No. Rather, Radical Orthodoxy, in being another movement of ressourcement, argues that the riches of the orthodox Christian tradition of faith and reason, theology and philosophy, can be deployed not only as a possible solution to the problems of late modernity, but as the only solution. That application will provoke some very radical conclusions concerning the signs of our times and the renewal of society.

This introduction is very far indeed from a complete characterization of Radical Orthodoxy. The texts of this Reader seek to demonstrate the variety of ways in which the riches of Christian orthodoxy are brought to bear on the problems of late modernity in radical ways. For example, we will see in many of the contributions to this volume the narrative and Christological understanding of truth which are equally definitive of Radical Orthodoxy. As well as the ways in which Radical Orthodoxy regards our condition of late modernity as an opportunity to think again about the possibility of a genuinely Christian imagination.

Notes


3 Duffy (see Note 1); John Bossy, Christianity in the West 1400–1700, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.


8 In this sense, it would not be off the mark to see Milbank’s early work as a protracted critical response to Christianity’s most trenchant critic and theoretician of power, namely Nietzsche and his successors.

9 See Amos Funkenstein, Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986, p.124. This shift can be seen very clearly with reference to divine action. For theologians influenced by the Neoplatonism of the Church in antiquity to the high Middle Ages, God is the primary cause of creation in whom all secondary and tertiary causes participate. In other words, God sustains creation in existence at every moment and makes possible causation within creation. God is the primary cause of this book being written (in the sense that God created and sustains its authors), but the authors are nevertheless real and potent secondary causes of the book being written. God’s causing this book is not the same as (not univocal with) my causing this book. Put simply, were it not for God I would not be here to write this book. In the modern period, God becomes a cause amongst other causes, exercising his power in a (univocal) way which competes with natural causes (‘did I do that, or was it God?’). This leads to some very unhelpful discussions concerning whether or not God causes certain events to happen. On the hierarchy of causes, see St Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on the Book of Causes, trans. Vincent A. Guagliardo, OP, Charles R. Hess, OP, and Richard C. Taylor, Washington, DC: The Catholic University Press of America, 1996. On Newton’s understanding of God as ‘pantakrator’ (the all-powerful), see Simon Oliver, Philosophy, God and Motion, London: Routledge, 2005, ch.6.

10 Milbank, Theology and Social Theory (see Note 7), pp.5–6.

11 This might momentarily remind us of Jacques Derrida’s concept of difference. While it is certainly related, it must be remembered that Derrida’s concept has a very specific purpose in the context of his philosophy of speech, writing and presence. Difference (with an ‘a’) is, of course, not a word: it a neologism of sorts which is related to the verb differer (which means both to defer and to differ), la différence (the difference) and différencier (the verbal adjective – the condition of differing, or deferring). Derrida is pointing to the meaning of language in terms of the difference between terms and the constant deferral of meaning. For an introduction to Derrida’s importance for theology (positive or negative), see Graham Ward, ‘Why is Derrida Important for Theology?’, Theology 95 (1992), pp.263–70.


14 Ibid., Book 1 para. 4.

15 See chapter 11 of this volume.

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19 The following comments certainly apply to the whole of Milbank’s Theology and Social Theory (see Note 7), and are made more explicit still in his Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon, London: Routledge, 2004.

20 See Gillian Evans, Augustine on Evil, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982. A good contemporary example of Manichean dualism can be seen in the Star Wars films.

21 See Milbank, Being Reconciled (see Note 19), pp.1-24 and Theology and Social Theory (see Note 7), pp.438-40. See also Conor Cunningham’s crucial work Genealogy of Nihilism, London: Routledge, 2000, in which he argues that the advent of modernity inaugurates a nihilistic ontology – an ontology of ‘lack’ or ‘absence’ – which at once refines the nihil.

22 As David Burrell points out when writing of Aquinas on religious language:

We cannot speak of God at all, in other words, unless it be under the rubric of ‘the first cause of all’. Yet such a cause leaves no proper traces since its modus operandi cannot conform to the ordinary patterns whereby effect resembles cause ...

None the less, Aquinas claims that certain expressions can be trusted to ‘signify something that God really is’, in the face of the two-fold manner in which we know ‘they signify something imperfectly’. His claim appears to turn on a special class of expressions: ‘words like “good” and “wise”’. Since this class is defined by the capacity of its members to function appropriately across quite diverse genera, these expressions have been singled out as analogous terms (David Burrell, Aquinas: God and Action, London: Routledge, 1979, pp.60-61).

In other words, analogous (perfection) terms (unlike the metaphorical) have a very broad frame of reference, sufficiently broad to refer to the divine (but not, of course, univocally).

23 Of course it is the case that metaphorical speech is not really the primary problem; it is far from clear how we might speak literally of anything, let alone God.

24 St Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, 1a.13.5.


26 We need to be very careful with terminology. In Greek, ‘analogy’ literally means ‘proportionality’. Hence when Aquinas follows the broad tradition of Aristotle in his discussion of religious language and uses terms such as proportiones we might think that he is espousing a variant of analogy of proportion. However, this would not be true to Aquinas’s text since he does not propose an understanding of religious language as proportional relationship amongst a range of uses.

27 Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, 1a.13.5.

28 In addition to being referred to as ‘analogy of attribution’, this variant of analogy is sometimes known as ‘analogy by reference to one focal meaning’, or, as Aristotle termed it, pro Hen ambiguity (meaning ‘in relation to one’).

29 Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, 1a.13.7.

30 In Aristotelian terms, ‘substance’ (ousia) does not mean some kind of material stuff. The metaphysics of substance is extremely complex. Generally, a substance is something which exists in itself rather than through another. Whiteness, for example, is not a substance, for it only exists in white things. A dog, however, may be considered a substance.

31 Milbank and Pickstock (see Note 25), p.35. Some may note the link with Pickstock’s reading of Aquinas’s doctrine of transubstantiation in After Writing (see Note 16), pp.259-66. Aquinas uses the concept of ‘accident’ in a very unAristotelian fashion when he claims that the accidents of bread and wine which persist after the consecration do not qualify the substance of the body and blood of Christ. They are, paradoxically, ‘free-floating’. In a sense, the Eucharist is a recapitulation of creation: creation is an accident, but not an accident of the divine substance. It is, by grace, ‘free-floating’. The transubstantiation at the Eucharist is therefore a Christological reassertion that creation itself is an act of pure grace.

32 Pickstock (see Note 16), pp.3-46.


34 This is what distinguishes the theological doctrine of creation ex nihilo from so-called Big Bang cosmology. Creation ex nihilo does not privilege any particular moment as being ‘the moment of creation’. At every moment, creation is ‘suspended’ over nothingness.

35 Milbank et al., Radical Orthodoxy (see Note 1), p.3.

36 How Aquinas identifies ‘theology’ is, of course, a matter of contention. There is that theology which pertains to philosophy and that theology which pertains to sacra doctrina, or the ‘holy teaching’ of the Church. Here I refer to the latter which in turn participates in scientia divina, God’s own knowledge.

37 See John Montag’s very important essay Revelation: The False Legacy of Suarez’ in Milbank et al., Radical Orthodoxy (see Note 1).

38 Milbank, Theology and Social Theory (see Note 7), p.1.

39 See chapter 3 of the present volume.

40 This is the particular contention of Michael Buckley’s highly influential At the Origins of Modern Atheism, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987.

41 On ideas in the mind of God, see St Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologicae 1a.15.