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Hyman - Radical Orthodoxy, Ethics and Ambivalence - JCRT 3.2

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One of the many defining characteristics of the postmodern 'sensitivity' may be said to be that of *ambivalence*. To some extent, such ambivalence derives from the dominance of a deconstructive disposition which saturates our postmodern condition. The logic of deconstruction is such that one deconstructs not in order to negate, discard or destroy but in order to problematise, question and interrogate. That which is deconstructed is *both* affirmed *and* negated, or *neither* affirmed *nor* negated. Whichever strategy is employed, the deconstructive disposition is one of ambivalence. Such ambivalence may be regarded as a performative enactment of a refusal of the false opposites and dualisms with which modern metaphysics presents us. To affirm the System, for instance, is to affirm presence and all the hegemonic structures that that brings, whereas to negate the System is to fall into nothingness and therefore to affirm absence and all the nihilistic corollaries that that entails. Problematizing both - presence *and* absence - entails a difficult process of negotiation which postmodernism - in myriad different ways - calls us to pursue.

3. This disposition of ambivalence is particularly important for the themes I want to consider here, namely, radical orthodoxy's challenge to the ethics it claims is promoted by a 'secular' (non-theological) postmodernism. Although 'secular theology', 'a/theology' or 'nihilist textualism' has been slow to respond to the challenge presented by radical orthodoxy to its own project, some detailed responses have now started to emerge. Critics of radical orthodoxy, myself included, have pointed out that far from overcoming dualism, violence and mastery, as it claims to do, radical orthodoxy actually re-inscribes them in new and often intensified forms; that radical orthodoxy is much more philosophically determined than it thinks; that it is unwittingly complicit with the nihilism that it seeks to overcome; and, inevitably, that its metanarrative unavoidably deconstructs itself from within.¹ But even if one is convinced of the validity of these and other such responses, the challenge presented by radical orthodoxy cannot be so easily discarded. For even after all these criticisms have been enumerated and unfolded, one crucial challenge remains: what are the ethical and political implications of the 'secular' postmodernism being defended? For if, as radical orthodoxy claims, the logic of 'secular' postmodernism condemns us all to the malign and tyrannical forces of a globalised market, a tyranny masked by a rhetorical but illusory veneer of freedom, is this not enough to vindicate radical orthodoxy and invalidate secular theology? In other words, is not this ethical and political argument stronger than any philosophical or theological one? If this is indeed so, it may be said that all our objections to radical orthodoxy count for nothing if we are unable to address this particular ethical challenge.
4. It is my suggestion, however, that a theoretical and practical response to this ethical challenge can be formulated without resorting to the totalising theological metanarrative espoused by radical orthodoxy. But to turn away from radical orthodoxy in this way does not entail a dialectical negation or refutation of it. On the contrary, addressing the ethical and political challenge presented by radical orthodoxy will also simultaneously be to utilise, endorse and

¹See, for instance, Gavin Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), especially chapters 4 and 5.

affirm it. In other words, it will entail being genuinely *ambivalent* toward it. Although we may not wish to endorse radical orthodoxy's cure, I suggest that we cannot afford to ignore its diagnosis.

5. Ethically and politically, radical orthodoxy's diagnosis of what it perceives to be our contemporary ills is by no means unique. Diagnosing and negotiating a way out of our contemporary cultural condition has become a preoccupation of countless intellectuals, academics and others. The problem, it seems, is no less than the economically affluent western world we presently inhabit. During the 1980s and into the 1990s, Marxist commentators such as Fredric Jameson, David Harvey and Perry Anderson did much influential work analysing the contemporary relationship between the cultural and the economic. Though their analyses were both subtle and complex, their fundamental contention was relatively straightforward: namely, that our economic order had developed into a new stage which they called 'late capitalism' and that this primary and foundational economic logic was given a secondary and derivative manifestation in the cultural logic of postmodernism. These critics were clear that both postmodernism and the economic logic on which it was thought to rest embodied ways of life inextricably bound up with travesties of justice and antithetical to socialist values and agendas. Furthermore, the efficacy of socialism as an effective vehicle of resistance was rendered obsolete by the post-modern proclamation of the 'end' of, among numerous other things, socialism itself. When combined with the postmodern sense of the 'end of history' as provocatively expressed by Francis Fukuyama, for instance, the result was a passive acceptance of the natural inevitability of free market capitalism and the futility of any form of resistance. Politics thus came to be displaced by aesthetics.
6. Though the analyses of Jameson and others remain highly relevant and influential, recent commentators have suggested that during the 1990s 'late capitalism' developed into a 'New Economy' characterised by, among other things, heightened digitalisation, e-commerce, deregulation and globalisation. Thomas Frank has recently argued that a particularly striking and disturbing feature of the 'New Economy' is the creed of what he calls 'market populism' which holds that extreme free market capitalism is the most natural and perfect economic expression of human freedom and democracy. For Frank, such a creed is particularly insidious because, as he sets out to demonstrate at length, far from promoting freedom and democracy, the New Economy effectively eradicates them. The triumph of the New Economy at the level of the popular consciousness lies in the fact that it has been able to repress freedom, democracy and equality whilst simultaneously presenting itself as promoting and embodying them. Frank says that market populism began as an ideology of business, a simple management tactic, but that what makes it worthy of attention is 'its recent triumph in the larger world of American culture, the process by which even non-bankers, non-CEOs, and non-Republicans learned to accept the logic of the market as a functional equivalent of democracy.'² He maintains that the New Economy is not so much representative of genuine economic changes as a set of beliefs 'that, once enacted into public policy, has permitted an upward transfer of wealth unprecedented in our lifetimes; it is a collection of symbols and narratives that understand the resulting wealth polarization as a form of populism, as an expression of the people's will.'³ Furthermore, such market populism has intensified the process of political stasis. If free market capitalism is the most perfect economic expression of the people's will, resistance

²Thomas Frank, *One Market under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism and the End of Economic Democracy* (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 57.

³Ibid., pp. 86-7.

becomes not only useless but also ‘democratically’ unjustified.

7. Analyses of this economic and cultural condition have not come solely from talented left-wing journalists like Thomas Frank. On the contrary, novels such as Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* (2001) and films like *Storytelling* (2001) and *Ghost World* (2001) have also proffered indirect but penetrating analyses. In a review of these books and films, the novelist Andrew O’Hagan says that in the world they portray ‘There is limbo, there is stasis, there is open-all-hours petrification. There is mild domestic psychosis and there are soft furnishings. All art is the art of real estate and self-help....Market populism travels in through the air-conditioning and fastens to the red blood cells. And in these lives, and in the books and films that venture to look at these lives, you notice how a single, powerful question pertains: what now?’⁴
8. Radical orthodoxy may be seen as but one response to this omnipresent question: ‘what now?’. What is common to all such responses is a sense that our contemporary condition is one that simultaneously demands *and* precludes resistance. Faced with this apparently irresolvable dilemma, it is little wonder that the question ‘what now?’ is being repeatedly and often rhetorically asked. Radical orthodoxy, however, wants to move beyond such rhetoric and toward an answer, a *theological* answer. Although radical orthodoxy would concur with much of the analyses of Jameson, Frank and others, it is unique in its narrative explanation of how we have reached such a condition and how we may negotiate a way out of it. At its most basic, the contention is that a logic of theology has been displaced by a logic of secular reason and that, through a long and convoluted (though inexorable) process lasting several centuries, the ultimate result of this displacement is the logic of late capitalism or, latterly, the logic of the ‘New Economy’. As the market has taken the place of the divine, it has become the ultimate logic that determines all else - the dominant metanarrative.⁵ The Marxist resonances of such a contention are obvious, but what is of particular interest here is radical orthodoxy’s disposition of theological ambivalence toward Marx himself.
9. John Milbank explicitly discusses the ways in which he is both ‘for’ and ‘against’ Marx. Most obviously, he concurs with much of the Marxist critique of capitalism which, he maintains, must be ‘retained and re-elaborated’. In particular, he says that because Marx ‘gives a critique of political economy and modern “political science”, both of which....help to define and construct secular power and authority, it is possible to read Marx as a deconstructor of the secular.’⁶ At the same time, however, there are important points at which he diverges from Marx. First, whereas for Marx it is the economic base that determines all cultural configurations, there is a much more fluid understanding of this relationship on the part of radical orthodoxy. Certainly, for radical orthodoxy, there is an inextricable connection between the economy of late capitalism and the cultural configuration of postmodernism, but this does not entail that the former alone determines the latter. On the contrary, it is held that these are both mutually founding and mutually constitutive. If there is a determining base, this would be the fall from theology. In this respect at least, there is a concurrence with Weber (albeit modified by the insights of Tawney) when Milbank says that the economic rationality of capitalism ‘had a specific beginning within western history, a beginning enabled by tendencies within Judaism and Christianity. Tawney rightly narrows this thesis to certain contingent theological

⁴Andrew O’Hagan, ‘Everything Must Go!’ *London Review of Books* Vol. 23, No. 24 (2001), p. 3.

⁵For some remarkable instances of the contemporary conflation of God and the Market, see Frank, *One Market under God*, pp. 2-4.

⁶John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 177.

developments, and we can now specify; Capitalism was partially enabled by a deviational individualist, voluntarist and nominalist form of Christianity beginning before Protestantism but also in the (vast) Suarezian inheritance and also in Cartesianism/Jansenism.⁷ Thus, it was a 'deviational' turn within theology itself which laid the cultural foundations for the economic logic of capitalism. Situated within a broader context, such a 'deviational' turn ultimately gives rise to nihilism which, in turn, gives rise economically to capitalism (which is the economic logic of nihilism) and culturally to postmodernism (which is the cultural logic of nihilism).

10. A second area of divergence lies in Milbank's opposition to the necessary teleology in Marxist analyses in favour of contingency. Marx, says Milbank, failed to recognise the sheer contingency of capitalism and therefore that it can only be opposed by confronting it with a similarly contingent narrative and practice, namely, theology. The contemporary triumph of capitalism is not part of a necessary process, it is maintained, but is a contingent result of a complex network of various historical and cultural movements (which may ultimately be traced back to a fall away from theology). Consequently, we cannot assume (as Marx does) that capitalism 'is irrational, and destined to collapse under the weight of its own "contradictions"'.⁸ In this respect, Milbank says that he concurs with Lyotard for whom capitalism can always precisely measure what threatens it and automatically make a corrective response.⁹ Milbank says that 'although there are inherent tensions within capitalism, like the conflict between the need to reduce labour costs, and the need to stimulate demand for products, there are, in theory, infinite possibilities of adaption and adjustment by which a "final crisis" could be endlessly postponed. Capitalism remains viable as long as certain asymmetries of wealth and power can be sustained, and the losers can be either coerced or seduced into quiescence.'¹⁰ Thus, we shall be reduced to ethical impotence if we passively anticipate a resolution that will/may never arrive. Any overcoming of capitalism must therefore be enacted through an equally contingent vision and practice. Furthermore, for Milbank, it is obvious that if the triumph of capitalism may be traced back to a fall from theology, then capitalism can only be properly overcome by a restoration of theology with its alternative logic that stands as the direct antithesis of the logic of capitalism.¹¹
11. The obverse corollary of this analysis is that any non-theological intellectual configuration will ultimately fail in the endeavour to overcome capitalism and will therefore always condemn us to the tyranny of the market. In particular, Milbank contends, secular postmodernism is a vivid illustration of this. Secular postmodernism is complicit with the spirit of capitalism because there is a necessary connection between them deriving from a nihilist ontology. This ontology derives from Nietzsche's devaluation of values and the triumph of the will-to-power. In such an ontology, intrinsic 'good' and intrinsic 'value' disappear, giving rise to incommensurable 'goods' and incommensurable 'values' each battling for dominance and supremacy. Ultimate 'good' and ultimate 'value' are consequently determined by those with the most *power*. Having attained this dominant and supreme position, they are then able to

⁷John Milbank, 'The Body by Love Possessed: Christianity and Late Capitalism in Britain' *Modern Theology* 3 (1986), p. 55.

⁸Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 192.

⁹Milbank here refers to Jean-Fran ois Lyotard, * conomie Libidinale* (Paris: Minuit, 1974), pp. 187-88.

¹⁰Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, pp. 192-93.

¹¹That Milbank regards Christianity and capitalism as being directly antithetical is evident when he says that 'If our worst fears are confirmed, and Capitalism transforms itself into a subtle totalitarianism, then the world will shape itself into a more definite (though perhaps more disguised) rejection of Christ.' 'The Body by Love Possessed', p. 61.

‘overcome’ all rival contenders by the very fact that they are able to exercise their attained power over them. Milbank contends that all secular postmodern philosophers expound their philosophies against the background of this intrinsically violent ontology, the political outcome of which is fascism and the economic outcome of which is unbridled capitalism.¹²

12. For Milbank, the stark corollary of this is that secular postmodernism is unable to formulate any effective response to the fascism and late capitalism to which we have become enslaved precisely because it is itself indebted to the very post-Nietzschean ontology that prepares the way for this enslavement. Thus, although Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, Lyotard and others may attempt to enact left wing and socialist political and ethical agendas, they will all ultimately fail in this endeavour. Milbank says that these thinkers all present versions of Nietzsche’s philosophy which nevertheless retains an *emancipatory* critique predicated on the possibility of a future release of freedom. But for Milbank, ‘this is to remain harnessed to a deception, namely, the idea that we can still step back from Nietzsche to Kant.’¹³ He says that Nietzsche had no such illusion and maintained that for those ill suited to the rigours of artistic self-determination, the most we could hope for was the discipline of a state organised for war. He goes on to say that Nietzsche, of course, ‘did not envisage the reality of recent capitalism, of a discipline operating surreptitiously, disguising itself as “pleasure”, of a war that is constant and invisible, of all against all, and all against created nature. But the ontology of difference should logically embrace this reality’ and, indeed, it half does so, yet still tries to claim for itself a continuing critical reserve.’¹⁴ It is precisely this ‘continuing critical reserve’ that Milbank maintains is unsustainable and that, consequently, secular postmodernism can provide no effective resistance to fascism and capitalism.
13. Milbank therefore constructs a fundamentally *ethical* case against secular postmodernism and for radical orthodoxy. If peace is our social goal and justice is our ethical/political goal, then theology is able to secure these goals, whilst secular postmodernism manifestly fails. In fact, the ethical case is all there is and can be. For, as Milbank himself recognises, he cannot show philosophically or metaphysically that theology is more justified or ‘truer’ than any other metanarrative.¹⁵ Hence, the importance of the ethical critique for Milbank’s ‘apologetic’.
14. Furthermore, the expositors of ‘secular theology’ are not unaware of the force and cogency of this line of analysis, even if they do not share radical orthodoxy’s proposed ‘correction’. Mark C. Taylor, for instance, has no illusions about the nature of the spirit that inspires and flows through our contemporary condition. He discusses Oliver Stone’s film *Wall Street* (1987) which, he says, effectively captures the spirit of the era: ‘When Michael Douglas, playing a character reminiscent of Michael Milken, preaches “Greed is good, greed is right, greed works” to a meeting of eager stockholders, he forcefully summarizes the gospel of the 1980s. In the world of junk bonds and insider trading, what had long been regarded as sin becomes virtue and vice versa.’¹⁶ When sin becomes virtue and vice versa, it is clear that our contemporary spirit is indeed the direct antithesis of the spirit of Christianity. Taylor

¹²Milbank says that postmodernists ‘embrace capitalist logic because it is, precisely, a *secular* logic, which acknowledges no substantive norms, and which can absorb and overcome within its regulative rule every traditional constitutive system of cultural exchange.’ *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 194.

¹³Ibid., p. 314.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Or better: Christianity is ‘truer’ but only in so far as it is more ethical. Here, the Platonic resonances are obvious: Christianity is ‘truer’ not in any foundational, metaphysical or representative sense, but because it is closer to the ‘Good’.

¹⁶Mark C. Taylor, *About Religion: Economies of Faith in Virtual Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 140.

goes on to consider the strategies of resistance advocated by Marxist critics like Jameson and Harvey and concludes that their line of analysis is 'theoretically deficient and practically misguided'. In particular, he criticises their attempts to recover a 'real' referent with which to challenge the 'illusions fabricated to promote consumerism'. He says that they would do well to reconsider Marx's own grudging acknowledgement of the inescapable ideality of capital and that therefore 'reality' can never be definitively or unproblematically distinguished from appearance. Thus, 'It is simply impossible to establish the qualitative difference between symbolic supra-structures and material infrastructures. What once appeared to be clearly defined opposites now seem to be complex interfaces.'¹⁷

15. Taylor is no doubt right so to criticise the strategies of these latter-day Marxists but one wonders what strategies of resistance will replace them. Taylor clearly acknowledges the close connection between postmodernism and post-industrial capitalism and he also recognises the need for some form of critical resistance. He says that 'The psychological, social, political, and economic struggles we face do not involve a conflict between the symbolic and the real but entail a contest between competing symbolic systems and networks. In a world in which all reality is becoming virtual reality, effective economic strategies and political action must be calculatedly artful.'¹⁸ The problem is, however, that the forms that such 'economic strategies and political action' may take remain undeveloped. It may well be that the attempt to secure a non-symbolic referent is misguided, but Taylor's response to the resistance of Jameson and Harvey is to insist that this resistance is inconsistent with what is being resisted. It seems that Taylor is himself aestheticising our contemporary condition, and this seems to be precisely the tactic he adopts in the discussion of Las Vegas that follows. Here he writes of 'consumer capitalism, whose capital now appears to be Las Vegas'.¹⁹ For Taylor, if Las Vegas is a trope of consumer capitalism, he suggests that this is perhaps the end toward which we have always been heading: 'If this end seems disappointing, perhaps this is because we have not learned the lessons Las Vegas teaches. In the hot sands of Vegas's silicon lights, the transcendence of the real vanishes, leaving nothing in its wake. In the dark light of this nothingness, it appears that what is is what ought to be.'²⁰ So if we find Las Vegas (or consumer capitalism) disappointing or disturbing, our response should not be to resist it, but to immerse ourselves more fully within it, to 'learn the lessons Las Vegas teaches'. In which case, it does seem that in spite of his best intentions for some form of critical resistance to our contemporary spirit, Taylor does seem to be at a loss as to how to effect it.²¹ And so here we return to the problematic with which radical orthodoxy confronts us. Does secular postmodernism condemn us to the tyranny of the market and the triumph of fascism? And is theology the only possible escape route?
16. In response to this question, I now want to answer ambivalently with a 'Yes' and a 'No'. In our evaluation and critique of radical orthodoxy, there is a sense in which we should be 'for' radical orthodoxy and a sense in which we should be simultaneously 'against' it. We should positively

¹⁷Ibid., p. 167.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 191.

²⁰Ibid., p. 201.

²¹Most recently, Taylor has suggested that the logic of complexity theory, as applied to our contemporary network culture, may provide a way out of this impasse. See Mark C. Taylor, *Hiding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) and *The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). This is to open up a whole new arena of debate that I am unable to address here. Suffice to say, however, that I am unconvinced about the efficacy of this move. There is a debate to be had as to whether the logic of network culture may resist the dissolution and fragmentation of late capitalism or whether, on the contrary, it re-inscribes the very things Taylor is seeking to overcome.

appropriate radical orthodoxy's diagnosis of the ills of late capitalist society, especially as it develops into the mode of the New Economy. One of the dangers of a post-modern disposition is the way in which it has a tendency to lapse into a laissez-faire liberalism, which can lead to ethical and political impotence. We should engage with and respond to the accusation we have been considering above, namely, that secular postmodernism actually colludes with the 'evils' of late capitalism (indeed, this would be a critique that would be made not only by radical orthodoxy, but also by the secular Marxists like Jameson and Anderson). We must be aware of the nature of this collusion and develop ways of resisting it. We should therefore embrace radical orthodoxy as a stimulant that prevents us from falling into a comfortable complacency. In developing such forms of resistance, however, I maintain that radical orthodoxy in itself provides an inadequate answer to our dilemma and that we must therefore ultimately take leave of radical orthodoxy. I suggest that such leave-taking is necessary for several distinct, though related, reasons.

17. First, we should be wary, for ethical reasons, of any call for the return of a metanarrative without remainder or reserve. Radical orthodoxy rightly diagnoses the danger of fascism, with its repression of the 'other' and its promotion of the 'same', but we must question the extent to which radical orthodoxy re-inscribes precisely such a logic, albeit in theological form. Totalising structures, we have come to learn, are inherently violent and oppressive. This insight was, of course, one of the motivating factors in the first appearance of what was later to become post-modern philosophy in France in the 1960s. Although the various and heterogeneous currents of continental philosophy from Derrida's deconstruction to Lyotard's proclamation of the 'end of metanarratives' to de Certeau's heterology to Foucault's genealogy did not constitute a 'movement' with a 'manifesto' or 'agenda', they did nonetheless form a loose web formed by a common purpose in their interrogation of totalising structures. It may well be said, as Mark C. Taylor now says, that such interrogative projects have now reached 'closure' and have brought about an impasse, and that we are now beset with differences that are tearing us apart.²² But if this is the case, then our task must be to develop new strategies that overcome differences without resorting to totalising structures. The strategy proposed by radical orthodoxy, however, is precisely the latter, as they insist that theology must become the ultimate metanarrative without remainder or reserve. Such a move will only re-inscribe the very totalising oppression from which postmodernism was attempting to liberate us, and it is consequently difficult to escape the conclusion that radical orthodoxy is itself another species of fascism.
18. Milbank's claim that differences are respected as different whilst being gathered up into a higher unity is unconvincing. To what extent is the *difference* of these differences still respected? The historical precedents - when theology enjoyed the pre-eminent status Milbank wishes to re-instate - are not promising. Christianity maintained its ultimate status by means of violence and oppression, whether physical or otherwise.²³ Indeed, this is not surprising, for the *logic*

²²This is the argument Mark C. Taylor develops in *Hiding*, especially pp. 270-72.

²³This is a point that has been made by numerous commentators who have suggested that such uncomfortable facts cannot be so easily elided in the way Milbank tends to do. See, for instance: Wayne John Hankey, 'Re-Christianizing Augustine Postmodern Style: Readings by Jacques Derrida, Robert Dodaro, Jean-Luc Marion, Rowan Williams, Lewis Ayres and John Milbank' *Animus* 2 (1997), an electronic journal at <http://www.mun.ca/animus/>, Robert Dodaro, 'Loose Canons: Augustine and Derrida on Themselves' in John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (eds.), *God, the Gift and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 79-111, Steven Shakespeare, 'The New Romantics: A Critique of Radical Orthodoxy', *Theology* 103 (2000), pp. 163-77 and Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology*, pp. 73-77.

of such absoluteness necessarily gives rise to such repression. If, therefore, we cannot avoid the conclusion that radical orthodoxy represents yet another species of fascism, it seems that we are being presented with a false choice here between a Nietzschean fascism on the one hand and a theological fascism on the other. In order to break out of this false dichotomy, it is necessary to allow a return of the 'other' that all totalising metanarratives seek to exclude. Such a return would interrogate and rupture those metanarratives themselves, and yet it is precisely such a return that the metanarrative of radical orthodoxy precludes. If, therefore, we are to overcome the totalising fascism of late capitalism, our strategy cannot be to confront it with an equally totalising metanarrative structure, whether theological or otherwise.

19. A second difficulty with radical orthodoxy's ethical strategy is that its social and political prescriptions presuppose an unwarranted omniscience. If late capitalism increasingly precludes any sort of social or political control whatsoever and lets the market run riot, radical orthodoxy once again moves dialectically to the opposite extreme. In the 'Christian socialist republic' envisaged by Milbank the 'destiny' of a product is not 'naturally' to be consumed but rather to be made 'equivalent'. Such equivalence of 'justice' 'presupposes some social consensus about the relative worth of different things *in advance* of particular market exchanges'.²⁴ Milbank goes on to qualify this remark by saying that he does not necessarily think it possible fully to control market supply and demand, and that the social ethical consensus necessary for 'just' exchanges cannot be imposed by the state. Nonetheless, it is clear that such a consensus is a necessary precondition for the society that Milbank envisages. This is significant because in the age of the New Economy 'consensus' (albeit of a different kind) is precisely what is thought to be responsible for the stifling of democracy. Consensus, in effect, eradicates the differences that are a necessary precondition for any form of democracy.²⁵ That Milbank should prize consensus above democracy is perhaps not surprising as the 'Christian socialist republic' he envisages appears ultimately to be a form of theocracy.²⁶ The consensus that is required for the implementation of such a 'totalitarian model of a just society'²⁷ is both absolute and impossible. It is, in effect, the Kingdom of God, and Milbank's social and political programme may be seen as a premature attempt to usher in the Kingdom of God on earth.
20. One of the ways in which the differences between secular postmodernism and radical orthodoxy have been characterised is as follows: secular post-modernists accept the course that intellectual and philosophical history has taken and keeps moving *further on*. This does not imply fatalism or quietism: the future must still be moulded and shaped, but the future is as much moulded by the past as by our shaping. Thus, there can be no total transformations but only further developments of what we already have. Radical orthodoxy, in contrast, seeks

²⁴Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 192.

²⁵See, for instance, Frank, *One Market under God*, pp. 15-23.

²⁶It should be noted that Milbank has explicitly denied the charge of theocracy: 'Radical Orthodoxy favours no theocracy, because theocracy is predicated on the very dualism it rejects: for the sacred hierophants to be enthroned there must be a drained secular space for them to command. But for Radical Orthodoxy there is no such space. For Radical Orthodoxy, the sacral interpenetrates everywhere, and if it descends from above, this descent is also manifest through its rising up from below.' 'The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy' in Laurence Paul Hemming (ed.), *Radical Orthodoxy? - A Catholic Enquiry* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 36-7. While accepting, however, that radical orthodoxy rejects such a dualism between the sacred and the secular, this dualism is overcome by absorbing and gathering up the secular into the sacred. To this extent, the charge of theocracy, whereby the secular is ruled and legitimated by the sacred, still stands even if there is no dualistic separation between them.

²⁷This is Clive James' phrase. See his essay 'The All of Orwell' in *Even as we Speak: New Essays 1993-2001* (London: Picador, 2001), p. 20. This essay on the work of George Orwell is particularly relevant for some of the issues being discussed here.

to 'correct' what it perceives to be past errors in philosophical and intellectual history (and specifically, the way in which history fell away from theology). It is therefore dissatisfied with any form of intellectual development that emerges out of the heritage with which we have been bequeathed, for this heritage is itself the product of certain disastrous errors. Thus, it seeks a total revolution and not merely piecemeal development. The same analysis may also be applied to the ethical and political sphere. When re-cast in ethical terms, this line of analysis confronts us with the following irreducible question: do we seek to effect ethical and political change by shaping and moulding what we have or do we attempt to implement a total transformation? I suggest that we can only do the latter with the benefit of an omniscience that will always elude us. Such omniscience would be required not only to predict what the nature of the resulting society would be but also to implement and regulate this society. Without that omniscience, totalising revolutions must, I maintain, be jettisoned.

21. Finally, we should also consider questions of pragmatics. Milbank has been notoriously dismissive of pragmatic concerns, preferring instead to pursue the higher calling of 'vision and contemplation'.²⁸ But if thoughts are to become something more, consideration must be given to the pragmatics of their effective realisation. When such consideration is given, however, the result can be less than encouraging. As we have observed, one of the consequences of the all-consuming character of the New Economy is that individuals and even nations are no longer in control of their own destiny. To make this claim is, of course, merely to state what many now take to be the obvious. In light of this situation, however, it has to be recognised that the prospect of the implementation of the sort of vision Milbank espouses is remote to say the least. This does not in itself invalidate Milbank's ethical strategy; to think that it does would also be to invalidate all other forms of ethical resistance, and therefore condemn us to a passive acceptance of the status quo. What it does do, however, is require us to consider the efficacy of all forms of *total* ethical revolutions. For Milbank, there can be no 'local' resistances, which he dismisses as ineffective and insufficient. Rather, he claims that our only response can be to effect a *total* transformation of the capitalist republic into a theological kingdom.
22. We have already raised doubts as to whether such a total imposition of a theological kingdom is as ethically desirable as Milbank claims. But even if it were unambiguously an ethical good, we must consider what happens when our conditions of existence render such a total revolution impossible. Do we then not reach deadlock, impasse and stasis, proclaiming the necessity of a theological revolution, while the suffering and injustices of the human condition continue, unalleviated, all around us? Richard H. Roberts makes a similar point when he says of Milbank's project, 'theology becomes the imposition of *stasis*, a rear-ward looking construal paradoxically rooted in eschatology, which has consequences which paralyse theology as embedded, grace-driven reflection entrenched in the real conflict and injustices of the human condition.'²⁹ Furthermore, he says that Milbank's theological critique of contemporary society is a 'Pyrrhic victory involving a retreat from engaged worldliness.'³⁰ Thus, if the only way of resisting the condition of late capitalism and the New Economy is by means of a total revolution, replacing one totalising metanarrative with another, and if that revolution turns out to be practically impossible, then we are left with an ethical stasis in which injustices continue, while we wait for the Kingdom to come.

²⁸I recall Milbank making comments to that effect during the discussion following the delivery of his paper at the 'Radical Orthodoxy' conference held at Heythrop College in the University of London in June 1999.

²⁹Richard H. Roberts, *Religion, Theology and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 206.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 260, n. 30.

23. In light of these criticisms, therefore, I suggest that radical orthodoxy does not provide the most effective nor, indeed, the most ethical strategy for resisting that which it wishes to resist and, indeed, to overcome. How, then, are we to negotiate a way out of this impasse? The difficult and complex task of developing and expounding a full-scale ethical response to our contemporary condition is beyond the scope of this paper, and will have to await another occasion. But we can at least identify some directions in which such a response would move as well as some of the forms that such a response would take. In doing so, the disposition of ambivalence, which, I suggested, should inform our ethical evaluation of radical orthodoxy, will again become evident. Some of the forms and directions such a response may take will already have been implicit in my ethical criticisms of radical orthodoxy, as developed above. But I here offer some brief remarks which may serve as 'prolegomena' to a future ethics of resistance.
24. First, without the omniscience necessary for the implementation of a total ethical and political transformation and recognising the political realities of a situation in which such a transformation is practically ruled out, we will instead resort to *tactics* in the sense in which Michel de Certeau understands them. For de Certeau, a tactic is 'a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power.'³¹ The determining feature of a tactic, therefore, is that it operates without a proper locus, in alien territory. Deprived of its own place, it seeks to subvert the alien place within which it finds itself. In this respect, it would appear that tactics are the only weapons available to those who would resist the seemingly irresistible economic whole within which we find ourselves inextricably caught. As we have observed, the characteristic feature of late capitalism is its totalising structure - it is a labyrinth from which there is no escape. Its tentacles reach even into those places with which its logic would appear to be incompatible: health services, educational establishments and even the Church.³²
25. It is precisely when one is deprived of any escape route that one will resort to tactics. As de Certeau says, tactics 'have begun to wander everywhere in a space which is becoming at once more homogenous and more extensive. Consumers are transformed into immigrants. The system in which they move about is too vast to be able to fix them in one place, but too constraining for them ever to be able to escape from it and go into exile elsewhere. There is no longer an elsewhere.'³³ Deprived of the possibility of moving elsewhere and, from that place, planning a strategic attack, the subversive tactician utilises the alien resources at her disposal in order to articulate a different logic, a logic of the other, a logic of resistance: 'Although they use as their *material* the *vocabularies* of established languages (those of television, newspapers, the supermarket or city planning), although they remain within the framework of prescribed *syntaxes* (the temporal modes of schedules, paradigmatic organisations of places, etc.), these "traverses" remain heterogeneous to the systems they infiltrate and in which they sketch out the guileful ruses of *different* interests and desires.'³⁴ It follows from this, as de Certeau also points out, that tactics are the weapons of the weak, those who are deprived of power. If, as

³¹Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, tr. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 37.

³²For an analysis of how the values of late capitalism, the enterprise culture or 'managerialism' have come to dominate such institutions in Britain, see Roberts, *Religion, Theology and the Human Sciences*.

³³de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 40.

³⁴Ibid., p. 34.

theorists of our contemporary condition argue, power and wealth are being accumulated by the few at the expense of the many, then those of us who would resist such a condition do indeed find ourselves in a position of weakness. Consequently, it would appear that tactics are our most obvious and perhaps only resource.

26. In contrast, we have seen that radical orthodoxy eschews tactics in favour of *strategy*. A strategy seeks not to subvert from within but to overcome from without - it seeks a total transformation. It 'postulates a *place* that can be delimited as its *own* and serve as the base from which relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats....can be managed.'³⁵ We have seen that radical orthodoxy pursues the strategy of 'out-narrating', 'overcoming', or 'defeating' the capitalist aeon (its target or threat) by the metanarrative of theology. But if the very possibility of strategy depends upon the existence of a proper place 'that can be delimited as its *own*', it is precisely such a proper place that radical orthodoxy finds itself lacking. As Milbank has himself suggested, even the Church can no longer count as such a place for it too has in large measure capitulated to the forces of darkness.³⁶ Without such a proper place, strategies are lacking the very conditions of their own possibility. They are thus destined to remain practically futile, impotent and powerless. This, I suggest, is the condition in which the ethical strategy of radical orthodoxy finds itself.
27. For de Certeau, tactics operate always and everywhere in the daily practices of life. If, however, we are to adopt tactics theoretically as well as practically, we shall find that such tactics, though necessary, are insufficient. This is because the success and coherence of such subversive tactics will depend upon some narrative account of what needs to be subverted and why. Without such a narrative account, tactics would have no theoretical rationale and would become merely arbitrary. It is in the gap between the world as it is and our narrative account of the world as it should be that such subversive tactics may consistently operate according to a particular exhortative vision. In this respect, at least, Milbank is right when he insists that post-modern theorists are unable to deliver the emancipation they seek. The attempt to make a half-turn back to Kant in order to secure such emancipation is a futile one because the post-Nietzschean world allows for no such comforting enclaves. Such an attempt would again appear arbitrary. Thus, we may concur with Milbank when he says that 'any ethically valid practice has to be rooted in a particular tradition which "projects forward" a horizon of ethical becoming.'³⁷
28. If this is the case, however, then we must consider the question of which particular narratives will be most inspirational and effective in our contemporary condition. In this respect, I again suggest that we should follow Milbank in looking to theology as providing precisely such a resource for several reasons. For one thing, theology may be characterised as a uniquely heterological narrative, a narrative of the 'other'. This is significant because, I contend, it is of vital importance - both ethically and philosophically - not to repress the horizon of the unnameable 'other', but to allow it to circulate, disrupt and negate - but without ever destroying - the narratives through which we move. I have shown elsewhere why I believe such

³⁵Ibid., p. 36.

³⁶See, for instance, the much quoted opening paragraph of *The Word Made Strange* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 1: 'For all the current talk of a theology that would reflect on practice, the truth is that *we remain uncertain as to where today to locate true Christian practice*. This would be, as it has always been, a repetition differently, but authentically, of what has always been done. In his or her uncertainty as to where to find this, the theologian feels almost that the entire ecclesial task falls on his won head: in the meagre mode of reflective words he must seek to imagine what a true practical repetition would be like.' My emphasis.

³⁷Milbank, 'The Body by Love Possessed', p. 60.

an horizon to be important - and, indeed, unavoidable - philosophically.³⁸ Ethically, however, this horizon of the 'other' is equally vital in at least two main ways. As we have already intimated, the disrupting effect of the 'other' will preclude totalisation, and the 'movement of departure' to which it gives rise will preclude us from coming to rest in a metanarrative that may enforce and re-inforce tyranny. As theology has developed various strategies for speaking (and not speaking) about a God who is wholly 'other', it has also developed a linguistic logic for its own self-negation which may (possibly) guard against tyranny. Furthermore, however, as we have seen, the horizon of the 'other' is necessary for the insertion of a critical leverage which can rescue us from an ethically debilitating aestheticisation and celebration of what is. Theological narratives themselves open up a gap between what is and what should be, and therefore provide for the return of the ethical imperative. Far from being 'realised', its eschatology is irreducibly 'other'. In the space between our fallen world and the 'other' world to come, the ethical imperative demands a response.

29. But what of the nature of this response? This brings us to the second primary aspect of theology: that it is, above all else, a narrative of *agap'* - a love that is excessive, that exceeds all times and places and, indeed, all determinations of 'being', as Jean-Luc Marion has been at pains to point out at length. This logic of *agap'* may be seen as a direct antithesis of the logic of late capitalism and the New Economy. If this latter logic is to be resisted, then an excessive a/logic of *agap'* would seem to be the most effective narrative with which to resist it. Such a narrative calls into question and confronts all instrumental calculations of risk, capital and profit, supply and demand, and consequently may be appropriated as one of the most strikingly relevant ethical narratives through which we should move.
30. It should be noted at this point that these 'arguments' for the 'return' of theology as a narrative of ethical resistance may be regarded as variations on Milbank's themes. For instance, the reading of theology as a uniquely heterological discourse may be regarded as a variation on Milbank's claim that theology may become 'internally post-modern' in a way that may not be possible for all other discourses. Similarly, the reading of theology as an excessive a/logic of *agap'* may be seen as a 'different repetition' of Milbank's theme that Christianity tells a story of ontological peace, harmony and love as opposed to the necessary violence and discord of nihilism and secular postmodernism.³⁹ Having, therefore, said 'No' to radical orthodoxy's ethical response to our contemporary condition, we now find ourselves ambivalently saying 'Yes' to it. Pressing the disposition of ambivalence even more intensely, however, we should also say that this 'Yes' must itself be subject to a certain qualification. For we have seen that an absolute return to theology *alone* is inadequate to our ethical task. Just as it was said that the utilisation of subversive tactics was necessary but not sufficient, the same may also be said of a return to theology. If, on the other hand, we allow theology to be supplemented by the insights of the critical theorists that Milbank dismisses as 'nihilists', we may find our way to a more promising path forward. If we allow such theory to problematise, interrogate and disrupt theology without, however, destroying it, we shall see that the very tropes that call us back to theology as an ethical narrative of resistance also simultaneously preclude us from returning to it in any absolute or unambiguous way.
31. If our unavoidable preoccupation with the themes of the 'other' and of *agap'* render theology

³⁸See Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology*, especially chapter 6 and the conclusion.

³⁹For a discussion of these 'reasons' as to why Christianity is not quite 'on a level' with all other narratives and discourses, see John Milbank, "'Postmodern Critical Augustinianism': A Short *Summa* in Forty-Two Responses to Unasked Questions' *Modern Theology* 7 (1991), pp. 227-28.

inescapable for us, these very same preoccupations simultaneously refuse a return to theology. Indeed, the logic of this refusal may be found, in embryonic form within theology itself. If we were to allow theoretical insights to expose these forms and develop them excessively and transgressively, then an absolute return to theology alone would be precluded. If, for instance, theology is a narrative of excessive *agap'*, it may also be said that this *agap'* excessively exceeds theology. The discourse of *agap'*, to which theology bears witness, may be regarded, in the words of John D. Caputo, as a discourse of 'predicative excess'.⁴⁰ Jean-Luc Marion takes a move in this direction, insisting that God is love before God is being (a move with which, incidentally, John Milbank has taken issue.)⁴¹ Marion says that the gift of being 'is liberated only in its exertion starting from and in the name of that which, greater than it, comes behind it, that which gives and expresses itself as gift, charity itself. Charity delivers Being/being.'⁴² This charity or *agap'* exceeds and precedes even the statement that 'God is'. But if this logic were developed and extended - excessively and transgressively (beyond, of course, what Marion would want to allow) - it would come to be seen that *agap'* exceeds and transcends every possible and particular determination of it, whether theological or otherwise. As de Certeau says of the trope of the 'other', it exceeds every possible and particular religious representation.⁴³ The excessive *agap'* to which theology bears witness exceeds every 'God' and every 'theology' and, in recognition of this, every God and every theology must therefore be left behind.

32. There is emphatically no *reserve* here, in the sense in which Derrida has accused forms of negative theology as always retaining a hidden and privileged reserve.⁴⁴ On the contrary, precisely without any such reserve, theology must be left behind. To say this, however, is not to suggest that *agap'*, any less than the 'other' may be pursued within a nihilistic vacuum. To attempt such a pursuit would give rise to silence and impotence and the latter would eventually give rise to the triumph of the Nietzschean will-to-power and its associated violent ontology that Milbank warns us against. Thus, the theological narrative body must be moved through in order to bear witness to this *agap'* and this 'other', in order to provide some form of positive determination of them. But in this very saying, in this very determination, the excessive and unspecifiable *agap'* and 'other' inevitably slip away, and thus we must also negate the theological narrative body, allow it to fall away, in recognition that 'this is not it'. Conversely, however, our goal is never finally reached, it is always deferred, always slipping away and so the narrative can never finally be discarded. We can never be done with theology, but neither should we ever come to rest in theology. Understood in this way, theology may serve not as

⁴⁰See John D. Caputo, 'God is Wholly Other' Almost: "Diff'rance" and the Hyperbolic Alterity of God' in Orrin F. Summerell (ed.), *The Otherness of God* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), p. 192.

⁴¹See John Milbank, 'Can a Gift be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic' *Modern Theology* 11 (1995), pp. 119-61, especially pp. 137f. See also the discussion by Theresa Saunders, 'The Gift of Prayer' in Clayton Crockett (ed.), *Secular Theology: American Radical Theological Thought* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 130-40, especially pp. 134-35.

⁴²Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, tr. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 102.

⁴³See, for instance, Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable, Vol. I: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, tr. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 15: 'To locate [the Other] apart, to isolate it from the texts that exhaust themselves trying to express it, would be tantamount to exorcising it by providing it with its own place and name, to identifying it with a remnant not assimilated by constituted rationalities, or to transforming the question that appears in the guise of a limit into a particular religious representation'.

⁴⁴See, for instance, Jacques Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials' in Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (eds.), *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), where he says that "'negative theology" seems to reserve, beyond all positive predication, beyond all negation, even beyond Being, some hyperessentiality, a being beyond Being', p. 77. Again, he speaks of the 'ontological wager of hyperessentiality that one finds at work both in Dionysius and in Meister Eckhart', p. 78.

the totalising metanarrative espoused by radical orthodoxy but, rather, as the 'non-totalising whole' that Taylor says we must now seek as an ethical response to our contemporary cultural condition.

33. Understood as a 'non-totalising whole', theology may well serve as the narrative grounding that will direct and guide our tactics of resistance. In bringing together the tactics of critical theory with the narrative of theology, we find that we are again pursuing a process of negotiation between absolute presence and absolute absence. On the one hand, our movement through theology as a narrative resource for ethical resistance means that we leave behind any *laissez-faire* abdication of ethical and political action, whether this takes the form of a despairing pessimism or a joyful and aesthetic embracing of that which is. On the other hand, however, we also leave behind the possibility of a *total* ethical and political revolutionary transformation in the manner of radical orthodoxy, which we have seen to be both ethically and practically problematic. Furthermore, we do not *solely* utilise the tactics of critical theory in the manner of 'secular' postmodernism, neither do we *solely* turn to the metanarrative of theology in the manner of radical orthodoxy. Rather, we recognise the necessity but insufficiency of each, and allow both to supplement and subvert each other. It is precisely this ambivalent process of negotiation that I suggest should form the basis of any ethical response to the unique challenges presented by our contemporary condition.
34. Finally, we should anticipate one possible objection that radical orthodoxy may level at the (dis)position I have been outlining here, namely, that it is insufficiently ambitious and insufficiently radical. Rather than settling for the more modest goals of tactics, we should instead be aiming for the more ambitious targets of strategies. To utilise tactics, it may be said, is to reconcile oneself to working *within* the System rather than seeking to overthrow it. It is therefore to accept the inevitability of a System that is, after all, contingent. In response, however, we may make two brief remarks. The first, indeed, has already been made, namely, that to be over-ambitious is to risk being under-ambitious. If we will settle for nothing less than the complete 'out-narration' or 'defeat' of a System that is powerful enough to refuse being 'out-narrated' and 'defeated', we will find ourselves in a situation where we repeatedly call for such a total revolution while the tyranny, oppression and suffering of the System continue, unalleviated, all around us.
35. Secondly, however, we should not assume that to resort to tactics is to capitulate to the inevitability of the System we are seeking, tactically, to subvert. De Certeau says that tactics 'circulate without being seen, discernible only through the objects that they move about and erode.'⁴⁵ So tactics do not merely 'move about' the System, but they may also 'erode' it, albeit 'in isolated actions, blow by blow'.⁴⁶ Who is to say what the cumulative effect of such erosion may be? Perhaps, after all, the erosion inflicted by such tactics may be more far-reaching than one might think. Certainly, there can be no guarantees. But the logic of guarantees, whether of a Marxist teleology or a theological eschatology, is precisely what a disposition of ambivalence seeks to overcome. Rather, we look for this better future with faith and hope. To this faith and hope we must hold fast, even when we are ambivalent about all else.

Notes

⁴⁵ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 35.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

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