# Flirting with Premodernity: John Milbank and the Return of the (Christian) Master-Narrative

Tom Jacobs, *University of Louvain*

## Introduction

Theologians sometimes complain about the way in which their subject is losing its role in the public sphere. Of course, the 'religious' has become again a topic of interest, also among secularists; but this does not mean that a serious philosophical and theological discourse about God has regained its public role. Nevertheless, it would be all too easy just to blame the actual social climate, as if theology enfolds itself independently of the spirit of time. Both our discourse about God and the actual social logic do not seem to be able to transgress a certain formalism. Therefore, we can interpret our time in the light of a radicalisation of a modern formal logic, which in the name of an (empty) ideal of freedom privatises all substantive dedication as much as possible. In such a way, Spinoza's idea of a *mathesis universalis* has found its most complete social incarnation in our neo-liberal capitalist order. When our being-in-the-world becomes understood in terms of monetary calculable relations, then the supremacy of formalism is complete. Moreover, this ideology is itself already the most fruitful strategy against each possible attack: capitalism claims to have abandoned all claims. Principles of quality have been replaced by principles of quantity.

At first sight, theological discourse therefore seems to be at odds with this logic: God is not a quantitative principle, but a highly qualified one, which asks within religion for a substantive allegiance. Nevertheless, it seems to have become difficult to make the opposition to a mere formalism concrete. Modern and postmodern theology is dominated by a formal framework which tells us what can be said and what cannot be said about God. And it goes without saying that the emphasis is on the latter. At the end of the eighteenth century Immanuel Kant wanted to define the limits of reason in order to make room for faith. Symptomatically, he thus nearly completely restricts

himself to a negative operation. Postmodern theology repeats this movement.[1] The problem with this is obvious: on the level of content nearly everything is compatible with the hollowed out structure of religion. The framework can be filled with nearly anything. As a result, theology risks making God too strange and far away. Moreover, such a negative theology can be labelled as neo-conservative; for there can no longer be any content-filled anticipation of the eschaton. It is not surprising therefore that this tendency gives rise to vehement reactions. Already in the time of Kant, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819) and Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788) present themselves as opponents to a Kantian logic of Enlightenment. They accuse Kant of nihilism, precisely because of his formalism which risks making access to reality itself impossible. A very similar reaction can also be observed now. The formalism of postmodern philosophy and theology urges some thinkers to make claims that originate within a clear content-filled tradition. It is against this background that the thought of John Milbank and the Radical Orthodoxy movement should be understood. That thereby the tone also changes, is obvious: the tone becomes again 'overlordly', this as a result from the all-inclusive, overarching claims that theology wants to make.

John Milbank is an Anglican theologian who received his first public attention with his *Theology and Social Theory*[2] wherein he opposes the conviction that theology can learn something from secular mediations in order to plead the case that theology is the mother of all sciences. For him the idea of a secular sphere has to be unmasked as an unfounded fiction; a fiction which has colonized philosophy and theology all too long. With the publication of the book/manifesto *Radical Orthodoxy* in 1999, the movement of *Radical Orthodoxy* saw the light of day. The publication was the project of a group of similar minded theologians, mostly connected in some way or another to the university of Cambridge and inspired by Milbank's attempt to counter secularist tendencies in theology and culture. Of the twelve authors, seven of them are Anglican, five are Roman Catholic; eight are British, four American.

The main aim of the movement consists in the attempt "to reclaim the world by situating its concerns and activities within a theological

---

1.   We can refer here to theology in the wake of Jacques Derrida (for example by John D. Caputo), but also to the thought of Jean-Luc Marion.
2.   J. MILBANK, *Theology and Social Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990. (further TST)

framework."[3] They want to demonstrate that theology is still alive and kicking, and that on the level of intellectual grandeur they do not have to yield the palm to postmodern philosophy or other sciences. The 'orthodox' is understood in the first place as a "commitment to credal christianity and the exemplarity of its patristic matrix."[4] The 'radical' mainly concerns their proposed use of this patristic matrix. They do not wish to return out of nostalgia or for aesthetic reasons to a premodern theology. Their purpose is "to deploy this recovered vision systematically to criticise modern society, culture, politics, art, science, and philosophy with an unprecedented boldness."[5] The central notion in all of this is 'participation' (in the Augustinian sense). Any other configuration would lead to a territory independent of God. The consequence of this independency is labelled as nihilism.

My main purpose in this article is not however to sketch an image of all the characteristics and diversities of the movement. Rather, I would like to focus on the thought of John Milbank, whose philosophy and theology can be understood as the backbone of many of the movement's most fundamental convictions. First, I will elaborate on his reading of modernity and postmodernity as nihilistic. This is necessary in order to understand why a Christian master-narrative should return. In the genealogy of the actual impasse, I will limit myself to three core moments in history: Duns Scotus (who breaks with the scholastic synthesis and opens the gate towards modernity), Immanuel Kant (the summit of modernity) and Jean-François Lyotard (who illustrates as a postmodern Kantian the contradictory nature of postmodernity). Thereafter, I will linger over Milbank's own epistemology and metaphysics. More specifically, I will compare and contrast some of his ideas with the theology of George Lindbeck. Both understand theology as non-foundationalist, but where Lindbeck tries to avoid ontological claims, they clearly return in Milbank's construal. A third part is dedicated to Milbank's alternative to the postmodern ontology of violence. Shortly, I will deal with his attempt to recon-

---

3.   J. MILBANK, C. PICKSTOCK & G. WARD, "Suspending the Material: the Turn of Radical Orthodoxy," in J. MILBANK, C. PICKSTOCK & G. WARD (ed.), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, London: Routledge, 1999, p. 1; cf. also for an introduction L.P. HEMMING, (ed.), *Radical Orthodoxy? A Catholic Inquiry*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000; J.K.A. SMITH, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy. Mapping a post-secular Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004.
4.   J. MILBANK, C. PICKSTOCK & G. WARD, o.c.., p. 2.
5.   *Ibid.*, p. 2.

textualise Augustine and with why only a patristic logic can offer us the necessary resources to overcome our actual state of nihilism. After this threefold presentation, one specific idea, namely the problem of intratextuality, will be used to come to an evaluation of his thought. I will conclude then with a more general reflection on the problem of 'tone' in philosophy and theology. What is the appropriate tone for a Christian theology, specifically in its relation towards modernity?

## I. The Return of the Master-Narrative

Milbank's thought is permeated by the conviction that postmodernity does not necessarily imply, as Jean-François Lyotard argues, the end of all master-narratives. He agrees with neo-Nietzscheans like Lyotard and Derrida that it is no longer possible to defend a narrative as metaphysically founded. Postmodernity is the end of a philosophical realism, departing from an enlightened belief in reason and our so-called objective capacities of knowledge. In this sense, we indeed experience the disintegration and failing of all grand narratives. Nevertheless, it would be naïve to presuppose that there are no more master-narratives at work. This is for two reasons. First, nearly everything gets more and more colonized by the master-narrative of neo-liberal capitalism. Second, the narrative of resistance against these tendencies can also be understood as a master-narrative, even when it presents itself in the disguise of a plea in favour of micro-stories. Milbank thus wants to argue that we are always telling a master-narrative, even when we are no longer aware of this fact. The difference between modernity and postmodernity consists in our consciousness of the unfounded character of all stories. At once, this is where the distinction between faith and reason comes into play: we are aware that we can no longer found our stories upon reason itself; but this does not prevent us from having faith in it, and this now on the basis of the inherent attractivity of the story. Applied to the Christian narrative: this narrative, like all others, is essentially a fiction. This is for Milbank the harsh reality which a post-Nietzschean theology should confront: Christianity is metaphysically no more founded than other narratives. However, this does not mean that the situation for theology becomes hopeless. It is theology's assignment now to convince us that the Christian story (as a story) is a better one than all other stories; moreover that it is the best one. For Milbank, only the Christian story can offer us an alternative for the nihilism of our time; a nihilism which can be under-

stood as the logical outcome of modernity. Therefore, I will first start with an outline of his reading of both modernity and postmodernity. As indicated, I will limit myself to three main figures, namely Duns Scotus, Kant and Lyotard.

## A. Modernity's and Postmodernity's Nihilism

Milbank considers modernity in the light of the invention of a secular sphere which results from a break with a metaphysics of participation. As such, he does not situate the beginning of modernity in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, but in the early fourteenth century with the thought of the *doctor subtilis*, Duns Scotus. As a Franciscan he questioned some of the cornerstones of the scholastic system of Thomas Aquinas and as such laid the basis for voluntarism (William of Ockham). In his metaphysics he resists Aquinas' analogical understanding of being. Aquinas defends the position that there is more or less participation in God's *esse subsistens* according to a hierarchy within being itself. For Scotus on the other hand, being cannot be understood analogically; therefore it is useless to claim that there can be a degree of participation in being itself. The notion of being is without all determination and can be applied to everything, but always in the same sense. Being is to be understood univocally. Looking at the mere being of beings, there is no distinction between the being of a human person, a stone or God. The subject of metaphysics is as a consequence the simple, abstract and univocal notion of being, which is applicable in the same sense to everything.

In his criticism, Milbank focuses mainly on Scotus' notion of univocity and the consequences this has on the relation between philosophy and theology. For him, precisely the latter becomes the core problem, onto which many of the later complications can be grafted. He defends the thesis that for Aquinas there is no strict demarcation between these disciplines. Rather reason and faith differ gradually according to the scale of participation in divine truth. But as a result of his univocal approach to being, Scotus undermines the whole logic of participation and gives birth to an emancipation of metaphysics from theology. The subject of metaphysics is being and being can now be attributed to everything in the same way. With Heidegger on our side, we could maybe be happy about this: Scotus seems to effectuate a break away from the ontotheological system of high-scholasticism. While Aquinas still understood the ontological in connection with the

theological, Scotus tries to escape the intermingling of these disciplines. Milbank however does not fully agree: with Scotus ontotheology takes its start and this more precisely as a result of his univocal and abstract notion of being. Also Scotus ends up speaking about God as the infinite being. But this outcome is no longer the result of being situated within a Christian theological narrative. Rather, Scotus arrives at his God by way of an abstract, metaphysical research. Aquinas' theology could still be labelled as theo-ontological, but it is only with Scotus that ontotheology is born.[6]

Subsequently, Milbank interprets the scotistic turn as decisive for a whole new paradigm. In the centuries after Scotus the gap between philosophy and theology only became wider. Nominalism and voluntarism became so influential that they shaped the whole theological tradition between the fourteenth and the sixteenth (and later) centuries. Not only can Luther's theology be considered as deeply permeated by nominalism, but even catholic theology suffered from the same evil. Milbank stresses here that figures such as Cajetan (1469–1534) and Francisco Suarez (1548–1617)[7], traditionally considered as the defenders of the thomistic tradition, only represented a degenerated form of Thomism, which helped to reinforce the birth of secularism. Suarez already (implicitly) presupposes the existence of a sphere of 'pure nature', which is in need of an external gift of grace. In modernity then, this idea of a 'pure nature' is further combined with a representational notion of understanding: something is known by representation of the knowing subject which approaches the thing in its bare presence, independent of any further participation.[8] The idea of a secular sphere, as a sphere in which philosophers can move around free from all theological inference, is born. "There were now

6. This can be considered a crucial point of criticism shared by most of the adherents to *Radical Orthodoxy*. Cf. o.a. Hemming: "the position often erroneously ascribed to Aquinas is in fact held by Duns Scotus—that God is known by way of an enquiry into being (*ens*), and therefore that God as univocal *primum ens* is the same as being, and therefore that God is understood as *summum ens* and *ens finis*." L. P. HEMMING, "Heidegger and the Grounds of Redemption," in J. MILBANK, C. PICKSTOCK & G. WARD (ed.), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, London: Routledge, 1999, p. 94.
7. Cf. J. MONTAG, "Revelation. The False Legacy of Suarez," in J. MILBANK, C. PICK-STOCK & G. WARD (ed.), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, London: Routledge, 1999, pp. 38–63. Cf. J. MILBANK, *Being Reconciled, Ontology and Pardon*, London, 2003, p. 113. (further BR)
8. Cf. BR, p. 116.

professional 'philosophers', where previously philosophy had survived as a kind of pagan 'moment' within Christian theology."[9] For Milbank then, the consequences of this philosophical autonomy are obvious: "granted autonomy to explore pure nature, philosophers quickly did not find what they were supposed to find—soon they were announcing materialisms, scepticisms, determinisms, rationalisms, pantheisms, idealisms and so forth."[10] Philosophy goes astray and finally only promotes abstract, life-inimical systems. Besides Descartes and Spinoza, he especially blames Immanuel Kant.

In the first place, Milbank accuses Kant of a false modesty. Kant's stress on the critical potentialities of the subject would lead inevitably to the impossibility of an authentic heteronomous relation and thus to the pride of a self-centered subject.

> The Kantian view that we perceive only within a supposed legal constitution of the finite is a false modesty that must turn dialectically into a Promethean hubris: since, if the finite does not convey some inkling of the infinite, it might as well be a finitude our subjectivity has somehow constructed and the infinite might as well be the transsubjective abyss our subjectivity emerges from and again negatively projects.[11]

Milbank here uses explicitly the criticism of Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788) and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819). In their meta-critique they had already pointed out the impossible border-crossing which permeates Kant's thought. Kant namely tries to define the limits of reason, but he has to undertake this project precisely by means of reason itself: reason defines her own possibilities and limits. In other words, the subject has to transcend itself in order to indicate its own borders. This implies that the borders of legitimate knowledge he discovers are already crossed: "to grasp it one must in some way stand outside it."[12] Kant wants to resist a speculative metaphysics, but he is only able to do this on the basis

---

9.   BR p. 116. For a criticism of Milbank's thesis on this subject, cf. D. HEDLEY, "Should Divinity Overcome Metaphysics? Reflections on John Milbank's Theology beyond Secular Reason and Confessions of a Cambridge Platonist," in *The Journal of Religion* 80 (2000), p. 281: "The opposition between the pagan and the Christian sources is neither structurally nor historically sustainable as an accurate narrative."

10.  BR, p. 116.

11.  J. MILBANK, *Knowledge: The Theological Critique of Philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi*, p. 27.

12.  WMS, p. 10.

of a metaphysical move which turns out to be irreconcilable with the outcome of his research. In some way, he thus replaces one type of metaphysics by another: what is constitutive of true knowledge is no longer our relation to the infinite, but the reduction to immanence. The relation of the knowing subject to the infinite becomes completely formal and negative: it is a relation to an *an sich*, which does not allow any content-filled pronouncements about what transcends the immanent order of the phenomenal. Milbank therefore considers the whole of Kantian philosophy as an aesthetics of the sublime. Kant's fascination by the aporetical, the absolute infinite, makes him install an unbridgeable gap between the spheres of immanence and transcendence. The result of this making absolute of the pure formal relation to the *an sich* then consists in making both poles meaningless. The *Ding an sich* becomes epistemologically nothing: we can only know appearances, not how things really are. But the same then holds for the appearances too. When we can no longer regard them as expressions of a deeper truth, appearances too become meaningless. Kant is no longer able to discover a depth within the phenomenal order. The only way to transcend the phenomenal, is in a relation to a radically unknowable order. Here the depth becomes an abyss; an abyss which can be worshipped by necrophiliac postmoderns, but which finally has to be considered as life-inimical. After all, Kant relinquishes the whole dynamic between the finite and the infinite. Milbank's conclusion is clear: Kant's thought is the intellectual summit of modern nihilism, for now both sides of the universe are dominated by a nothingness: the infinite is nothing, the finite is nothing.

When modernity is read as nihilistic, one should then expect that postmodern thought is gifted with the resources to overcome this nihilism. For Milbank however, such a conclusion is too naïve. He agrees with much of the postmodern criticism; but finally most authors fall into the same trap. He regards Nietzsche, Heidegger, Lyotard, Foucault and Derrida finally as the representatives of one single nihilist philosophy. They emphasize correctly the problematic nature of modernity, but without being able to transcend modernity. Milbank therefore wants to radicalize their criticism, in order to be able to offer a genuine alternative. Their reading of subjectivity as the outcome of underlying processes and dynamics is namely understood in connection with an understanding of being as a pointless play of differences. On one side, this seduces some of them to embrace this play, and thus negativity itself, as the absence of meaning. On the other

side, a certain return of ethics is discernible. Precisely here, however, postmodernity's contradictions render themselves manifest. Milbank wants to demonstrate that a genuine ethics is irreconcilable with their agonistic ontology, and thus that postmodern philosophy ultimately has to be understood as nihilistic. Let us take a look at Milbank's attitude towards Lyotard.

Lyotard has worked out a philosophy of heterogeneity, in which he connects respect for the *différend* with a strong notion of justice and freedom. According to Milbank, the whole of Lyotard's thought consists in an attempt "to distil a residue of modernist freedom, after it has been already dissolved into the fluid of modern power."[13] Power and freedom thus end up in an impossible tension. Symptomatic here is Lyotard's nihilistic reversal of the Kantian imperative: "act always so that the maxim of your will may (almost) not be erected into a principle of universal legislation."[14] Like Kant, he wants to assure freedom. But in opposition to Kant, he is aware of the fact that the praxis of our freedom cannot be understood from within a fictive private sphere. In the praxis of our freedom, we are caught in conflict. This is where his 'ontology of violence' becomes manifest: the attempt to guarantee freedom implies that we are aware of our being determined by stories and by the power of others. In this sense, we are all subject to the arbitrariness of myth and its uncontrollable power. Lyotard will, however, connect this paganistic moment of struggle with a very liberal idea. He presupposes the right of all people to participate in this struggle. Therefore, he warns us about meta-stories or master-narratives.[15] The domination of a master-narrative prevents certain groups and individuals from genuine participation, because the master-narrative controls in a coercive way the succession of regimes of phrases and as such the whole play of differences.

Milbank's objection is twofold. First, Lyotard cannot revert to a notion of freedom of participation. How strong, or how weak we are

13. TST, p. 316.
14. J.-F. Lyotard, as quoted by Milbank, TST, p. 316.
15. The term 'meta-story' and 'master-narrative' indicate a structural difference from first-order discourses. A meta-story organizes different discourses. It tells us how we should understand the relation between several discourses. A master-narrative then is also a meta-story, but with the difference that it has a different connotation and that the bond with one of the first-order discourses is presented as stronger, for now one of the first-order discourses also fulfils the role of a meta-story: it determines the relation between all discourses in an uplifting of a first-order discourse to a master-level.

is already determined by stories which we have heard and to which we are connected. Our narrative *Geworfenheit* prevents a neutral start. Second, how can we distinguish between a legitimate competition and an illegitimate terror which prevents others from participating? Here he touches upon the problem of Lyotard's own impotence. As a result of his ontology, Lyotard has to admit that his own discourse is only one discourse among many others. In this way, he is quite powerless, confronted with the colonisation of our life-world by a capitalist discourse. Jürgen Habermas therefore labels Lyotard as neo-conservative: with his ontology and plea for micro-stories he only favours existing relations of power. In Milbank's words:

> Lyotard may proclaim: let an infinite diversity of language-games rule! But he cannot pass this off as liberal pluralism, because nothing, in his philosophy, in principle renders illegitimate the infinite expansion of one language-game at the expense of others, nor the capture and manipulation of many language games by a single power.[16]

Lyotard is thus not able to think through the insights and impasses of postmodernity. While holding to a Nietzschean ontology, he nevertheless falls back on modern schemes to demonstrate that his ethics is not just an aesthetic-ironic-Nietzschean play, but driven by a genuine desire for justice. This is for Milbank the problem of all postmodern neo-Nietzscheans[17]: they cannot deliver what they promise. They are finally not able to escape an ontology of violence and so are unable to offer us a way out of the contemporary impasses.

## B. Milbank's (Primary) Metaphysics

As already indicated, Milbank shares with postmodern philosophy a certain standpoint that is critical of modernity. At the same time however, he wants to counter their relativist perspectivism and their ontology of violence, by radicalising the postmodern perspectivism and by taking particularity more seriously. I'll try to clarify this by

16. TST, p. 317. Milbank presents a slightly distorted image of Lyotard. It is not fully correct to state that nothing renders an infinite expansion of a story illegitimate. In such an expansion, the denial of the *différend* in fact becomes a norm. Nevertheless, Milbank is right in pointing out Lyotard's impotence.

17. Nietzsche himself and Heidegger can in some way be understood as an exception here.

taking a closer look at how his thought is in some way similar to the thought of George Lindbeck.

In the theology of Lindbeck, Milbank discovers the suggestion of a new 'unfounded' metaphysics. Milbank's aim is namely to develop a metanarrative realism. Theological speech then no longer pretends to offer a direct representation of reality, independent of our speech; speech and reality become intertwined. Linguistic utterances are no longer taken as cognitive propositions, but have to be read within the larger framework of the story. For it is precisely the story in its entirety which now presents 'reality' to the adherents of the story. Theologically speaking, the world becomes absorbed within the biblical story. The biblical story is thus constitutive of the world, and not the other way around, at least for those who belong to this particular narrative tradition. In the words of Milbank:

> A postmodern theology has to understand that both the objects of Christian faith—insofar as they are imaged, and articulated—and the modes of Christian experience, are derived from a particular cultural practice which projects objects and positions subjects in a cojoint relation, relating the one set to the other.[18]

Both Lindbeck and Milbank thus start from a Wittgensteinian scheme, in which truth is inseparably connected with a particular language game and a particular form of life. In their non-foundational theology, truth is in the first place to be understood as intrasystemic. Nevertheless, we have to be careful not to reduce Milbank's notion of truth to an intrasystemic one. Their common starting point does not prevent Milbank from working in a different direction. Postliberal theology presents to us a rather modest version of a metanarrative realism. Milbank however will radicalise this kind of realism by stressing the meta-character and by no longer relating the validity of truth claims to a particular form of life. Here, the particularity becomes again the *ratio cognoscendi* of the truth, although not in a traditional sense: a particular language game 'invents' the truth, but in such a way that it transcends the borders of this language game. Truth here regains its universal scope. It becomes again 'the truth' to which others should be converted. Milbank is after all convinced that Lindbeck is not coherent in his attempt to rule out ontology and the idea of correspondence.

---

18. TST, p. 382.

Lindbeck resists the cognitive-propositional paradigm, according to which propositions refer to language-independent realities. Nevertheless, he does not fully abandon the idea of reference. For Lindbeck, the practice in its entirety refers to reality. The whole is understood as an answer to the call of the absolute. Milbank, however, wants to demonstrate that this logic, at least in a second order, implies a propositional moment and finally an ontology. Crucial here is the importance of imagination: the religious story is unthinkable without an imagination of the relation between on the one side the absolute and on the other side the praxis and story as answer. This means that the Christian story in its entirety cannot be understood on the basis of a few timeless schemata or *regula fidei*, which would present us with the framework of the original story of Christ. The imagination of the relation between the absolute and the religious praxis always implies a surplus, and so a speculative-propositional moment. As an example, let us take a look at the doctrine of incarnation. This doctrine takes its starting point in Scripture and more specifically in the story of Christ and the praxis of the first Christian. The doctrine itself then articulates the understanding which is already latent in the story and praxis. Applied to the incarnation: the idea of Christ as the measure of all reality (just as also the Father is this measure) is part of the core of the story and praxis. The doctrine thus promotes and articulates a pre-existing christocentrism. Yet, according to Milbank, something more than just articulation occurs. It would be naïve to suppose that everything is already included in the story from the beginning. The story itself does not provide us with all the resources necessary to decide about all the possible discordances which might arise. Therefore, one has to confirm the necessity of a radically inventive moment, inherent in the formulation of a doctrine. For example: the story of Christ, in contrast with the doctrine, does not give us a definitive answer as to the possibility of new and other revelations. The doctrine then confirms the definitive character of God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

This speculative surplus does not, however, amount to a suspension of the cultural-linguistic paradigm or to a renewed plea for a philosophical realism. All reference is imagined and the only legitimation of the surplus is to be found in the inherent attractivity of the presented image. He does not again presuppose an independent reality at hand. In this respect, he agrees with Lindbeck on the necessity of always reconnecting the doctrine with the preceding story and praxis. The only problem is that Lindbeck overlooks the dynamics between the

first (story and praxis) and the second order (doctrine) and installs the first as a new and absolute foundation.[19] Lindbeck therefore lapses into what Milbank calls a narratological foundationalism. Lindbeck refuses to see how the doctrinal level evolves throughout history. He limits the Christian story as a meta-story to the story of Christ, and in such a way that this functions as a basis for an ahistorical conception of doctrine. He thereby denies the actual meta-narrative character of the Christian story; a story which consists for Milbank essentially in the genesis of the Church. Moreover, as a result of his ahistorical conception of theology, Lindbeck risks reducing Christ to a Gnostic Christ. Truth is thus not only reduced to a truth of coherence, in his dismissal of the idea of a genuine correspondence, but also becomes vehemently ahistorical. Theologically, he ignores the role of the Church and tradition in the process of discovering truth and orthodoxy. Nevertheless, it suffices here to see how Milbank takes Lindbeck as a starting point, but this in order to reinstall the dynamics between both levels and to reassert the Christian story as a meta-narrative without relapsing into a form of foundationalism.

---

19. In other words: Lindbeck dismisses the complex relation between the paradigmatic and syntagmatic order. By absolutising the paradigmatic setting, he leaves no room for further syntagmatic evolution. However, for some critics, this critique is also applicable to the thought of Milbank himself. Milbank does not leave enough room for a genuine evolution of the Christian story. Also in Milbank's account, the Christian is essentially self-centred. As a result of this, he ends up with a cultural solipsism which leaves nearly no room for enrichment by other non-orthodox stories. Cf. for example J. DANIELS, "Another Response to John Milbank," in *New Blackfriars* 82 (2001), pp. 233–239. In his critique, Daniels finds support in the thought of another *Radical Orthodoxy* writer, namely Gerald Loughlin. Loughlin wants to take the syntagmatic aspect of the evolution seriously and so connects this idea with a stress on the eschatological. Milbank risks denying the latter, or more precisely: he risks presupposing an already fulfilled eschatology. "What is in danger of dropping out of view here is the tension, the difference, between the exemplary and the yet-to-be-fully-realized story of Christ." The Christian meta-story must for Loughlin always be read within the perspective of another meta-story, namely of Christ's second coming, and this as a meta-story which is still largely unknown to us. A monopoly of one master-narrative is therefore labelled as hopelessly pretentious. All narrative continuity is to be understood as provisional and the Christian story in the light of an "extending tradition of narrative linkages, in which now some stories, now others function as the synchronic animators of the rest, so that there is always a 'buzz' within the tradition, a movement of story against story, a never stable positioning of an always possible indeterminacy with regard to new linkages, new stories." G. LOUGHLIN, "Christianity at the End of the Story or the Return of the Master-Narrative," in *Modern Theology* 8/4 (1992), pp. 365–384.

But does this postliberal move necessarily imply a certain kind of metaphysics? Milbank thinks so, although he prefers to speak of a meta-story. Lindbeck himself does not consider himself to be metaphysical. Postliberal theology is for him an attempt to overcome the foundationalism of metaphysics. Nevertheless, even Lindbeck's theology is based on a set of a few (unfounded) ultimate presuppositions which inevitably imply a kind of metaphysics. Non-foundationalism therefore does not imply in Milbank's reading the absence of metaphysics, but only a specific way of dealing with metaphysics.[20] It can no longer be defended as grounded in rational certainty, but one can still adhere to a metaphysical logic on practical grounds or grounds of faith. Metaphysics thus becomes intertwined with a specific form of life. Milbank himself makes use of a postmodern metaphysics of particularity, in order to reinstall a premodern metaphysics of participation (as his secondary metaphysics). The postmodern logic which allows him to make this move is itself to a high degree pragmatically motivated. Crucial is not only the insight that we always presuppose a certain metaphysics or meta-story, but especially the idea that we are more than ever in need of a meta-story which is able to counter the raging meta-story of a neo-liberal ideology. Milbank himself speaks about a linguistic idealism, to be defended on pragmatic grounds.[21]

It is important here to understand the peculiar nature of this primary metaphysics, in order to comprehend why Milbank's post-modern stance leads to a retrieval of premodern schemes. His linguistic idealism dictates that we can only think about truth from within a very particular cultural-linguistic framework. This means that all rationality is finally tradition-bound and that there are no tradition-independent criteria to decide what rationality *an sich* could be. The stress on particularity however has as a consequence a remarkable and paradoxical turn. A theory which states that all rationality is tradition-bound obliges someone who adheres to this theory to speak from his own particular tradition. But then, one can no longer defend the theory as a generally valid theory. The general theory is self-denying.

---

20. Of course, he will also point out that not all kinds of metaphysics are compatible with non-foundationalism, and that a participation-metaphysics is an appropriate option because of its compatibility. More specifically, he stresses that the postmodern criticism of metaphysical notions such as presence, substance, causality and subjectivity does not imply that notions of transcendence, participation, analogy and teleology are no longer defendable.
21. Cf. TST, p. 343.

The peculiar nature of this logic becomes clearer when we take a look at the relationship of philosophy and theology. Milbank's general theory takes the shape of a philosophical theory about the nature of rationality. Consequently he becomes obliged to speak as a Christian from within the Christian tradition. Moreover, he will have to subordinate philosophy to theology. As a result of the self-denying character of his philosophy, the only way to be coherent is to no longer defend the theory as being valid in an objective, rational way. To be coherent, Milbank has to speak as a theologian; he has to defend all his claims as rooted in the particular Christian tradition. We could label this as a U-turn philosophy: he philosophically points out the inadequacy of philosophical speech, in order to make room for the discourse of theology. On one side, this makes him postmodern. On the other, it allows him to take again Christian claims seriously and to reinstall certain premodern schemes. Philosophically, he has to admit that the Christian story is not better or more founded than other stories; theologically, however, nothing prevents him from making claims about the nature of reality and to develop a specific ontology. I will come back to the character of this U-turn logic in my evaluation. For a more complete understanding of Milbank's thought, we still have to take a look at his version of the Christian alternative.

## C. The Christian 'Counternarrative'

As we have seen, postmodern philosophy offers Milbank resources for a certain radicalisation of postmodernity's criticism of modernity and for a retrieval of certain premodern elements. Precisely by stressing the particularity of all knowledge claims, he makes possible a radical defence of the Christian worldview as opposed to the modern world-view. Theology is then justified in making metaphysical claims. The main difference with premodernity and modernity is to be found in the formal structure of legitimation: a postmodern master-narrative can no longer be defended as being rooted in rational certainty. One has to admit that the Christian story is itself a *mythos*.[22] A traditional apologetics is therefore impossible, for this would still presuppose the existence of a tradition-independent reason. Nevertheless, this does not mean that it would be impossible to convince non-Christians of the

---

22. However Milbank sometimes suggests that even in premodernity, theology has been fully aware of its 'mythical' character.

worth of Christianity. The Christian story convinces on the basis of its attractivity, or what he calls "reasons of literary taste."[23] But his logic is in the first place not aesthetical. The attractivity is foremost connected with a pragmatic logic: the attractivity depends on the possibility of offering an alternative to the contemporary nihilistic impasse.

After having sketched the formal structure of Milbank's thought, we now have to ask ourselves why he presents the Christian story as the best alternative. What makes it possible to Christianity to out-narrate other stories? This is for Milbank essentially a question about ontology. In his reading both modernity and postmodernity share a similar ontology, namely an ontology of war: they ultimately assess reality as a struggle. This is the line which connects Hobbes, Spinoza, Kant, Heidegger and Derrida. The Christian story then is based on contrary premises. Christianity does not acknowledge an original violence but sees reality as a harmonious ordering of difference. In Milbank's words: "Christianity is the coding of transcendental difference as peace"[24]. Theologically, he considers it to be crucial to reassert a theology which is not contaminated by modernity, i.e. a pre-scotistic theology. Patristic theology, and particularly Augustine should show us the way. By means of recontextualising Augustine, he thus hopes to put forward a strong alternative to a modern reading of history, to modern nihilist ethics and to modernity's ontology of violence.

Augustine shows us how for Christians the mythical beginning of history is not tied up with a dialectical dynamics of power, but coincides with a peaceful gift. The basis of a Christian worldview is thus a vision of peace, valid for the whole of creation before the fall. It is only with the fall, that structures of *dominium* pop up. But also in our post-lapsarian condition, we are not fatally subjected to these structures. Christians are given a message of salvation, as a deliverance from the structures which partly characterise the *saeculum*. This however is not to be understood only as a general promise, whose execution is to be constantly postponed. Christians already participate before the coming of the *eschaton* in the fullness of the city of God, because this city is itself on pilgrimage in the world. At this point, Milbank explicitly speaks about a 'nomad city', as the idea of a city

---

23. TST, p. 330.
24. TST, p. 6.

without place, without walls and without gates.[25] Internally, this city is determined by the original gift of peace and by equal concern for all its citizens. Externally, it constantly offers reconciliation to its enemies.

The initial act of peaceful giving also opens up the specificity of Augustinian ethics, which can be understood from the perspective of a constant positive exchange of the gift of grace. The church, which shapes the Christian vision of peace, is here the model par excellence: she does not allow any original violence, but takes up her members in the reciprocal exchange of love as a gift of God.[26] Nevertheless, Augustine does not fully exclude the possibility of the use of violence by the church: when the ultimate goal is peace, the church is allowed to make use of violent means. Milbank however will stress that for Augustine punishment is finally to be considered as self-punishment through sin. He thus reads Augustine's story of Christianity as an essentially open story, which does not exclude, but which is open to offering the gift of peace to all. Applied to the problem of orthodoxy: Augustine is not the one who excludes; the heretics are excluding themselves as a result of their stress on inward purity.

The counter-ontology consists in a Christian metaphysics of participation. This allows us to reconcile unity with difference by starting from a God who is himself already relational and in whom the whole of creation participates. Important in this respect is Augustine's appropriation and Christian transformation of neo-Platonism. Neo-Platonism makes it possible to overcome a strict division between God and world, by understanding everything as participating in the divine. The God of neo-Platonism, however, remains in itself too static and too alien in its relation to the world. Milbank therefore proposes (with the help of Augustine) to think about God as a series of differences, which is itself also differentiating. God is then not, as in a Plotinian scheme, a unity beyond being and difference, but instead superabundant

---

25. Cf. J. MILBANK, "'Postmodern Critical Augustianism': A Short Summa in Forty Two Responses to Unasked Questions," in *Modern Theology* 7/3 (1991) 225-237, p. 229.

26. In its turn, this then also makes possible an intrahumane ethics, and in such a way that it reveals to us the close link between ontology and ethics. Cf. for example BR, p. 57: "For this economy, to offer charity, whether as original gift or restorative forgiveness, is only possible if one is already receiving the infinite divine charity, since charity is not an empty disposition (as it later became), but the ontological bond between God and creatures, whereby creatures only are as the receiving of the divine gift and the unqualified return of this gift in the very act of receiving."

being.[27] The stress is not on the static, but on the dynamic and circular life of God which is difference. This is expressed in the doctrine of the trinity, which informs us of the 'musical' harmony of the infinite. Creation then participates in this differential life. God is not, however, an external factor preceding his creation. God is not a substance existing on its own, who in a certain moment decided to create something external. Creation is the differentiating of God. Therefore, creation as well cannot be understood from the perspective of substances: "There are no things, no substances, only shifting relations and generations in time."[28] Beings are dynamical-relational entities, whose being depends on their participation in the musical harmony of the infinite. This is the basis for the Christian conviction that everything is created as good and that the ultimate reality is peace. Evil is therefore to be understood as a privation of being, for a metaphysics of participation renders it impossible to attribute being to evil.[29]

Nevertheless, this premodern type of metaphysics is not in itself the basis for his retrieval of the master-narrative. The metaphysics of participation is just a part of the proposed master-narrative. His primary metaphysics is a linguistic idealism, to be defended on pragmatic grounds. But this Wittgensteinian metaphysics is of such a nature that it lets him hook up with a (slightly modified) premodern metaphysics. For Milbank, the stress on the particularity of language games means that he has to identify himself with the metaphysics of the Christian tradition. In his work after his *Theology and Social Theory*, he thus becomes more concerned with specific theological questions. It would however lead us too far to take a closer look at these issues. I thus end my overview of his thought here, and will proceed with a critical evaluation of it.

## II. The problem of intratextuality

The thought of John Milbank is both reviled and admired. Some critics reproach him for an unfair reading of some of the authors he either criticizes or appropriates. 'Scholars' point out that his dealing with

---

27. Cf. TST, p. 423.
28. TST, p. 426.
29. For his defense of the privation-theory, cf. J. Milbank, "Evil: Darkness and Silence," in J. Milbank, *Being Reconciled. Ontology and Pardon*, London: Routledge, 2003, p. 1–25.

Augustine is quite one-dimensional[30], that he misinterprets Aquinas[31] and that he reduces the thought of Kant[32], Rahner[33] and the postmodern Nietzscheans[34] to a caricature. As a result, some insinuate that he is a theological charlatan.[35] Others reduce Milbank's thought itself to a caricature: they refuse to take him seriously in their conviction that he simply returns to premodernity and the fathers of the church. Contrariwise, some theologians admire him precisely for his attempt to reinstall theology in all its grandeur.[36] However, both rabid opponents and admirers often fail to shed sufficient light on the actual dynamics and character of his philosophy. Theologians too easily take some of his presuppositions for granted, without realizing how problematic some ideas are philosophically. I would therefore like to focus on the principle of intratextuality, in order to come to a more critical evaluation of his thought. This will allow us to test the coherence of his thought, but also to realize the potentialities and eventual dangers of it.

As already indicated, it is crucial for Milbank that theology does not allow a positioning of her discourse by external discourses. Theology should thus resist the use of secular mediations and has to

---

30. Cf. o.a. R. DODARO, "Loose Canons: Augustine and Derrida on Their Selves," in J.D. CAPUTO & M.J. SCANLON (ed.), *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999, pp. 79–111; W.J. HANKEY, "Re-christianizing Augustine Post-modern Style. Readings by Jacques Derrida, Robert Dodaro, Jean-Luc Marion, Rowan Williams, Lewis Ayres and John Milbank," in *Animus* 2 (1997), pp. 1–34.

31. Cf. N. LASH, "Where does Holy Teaching Leave Philosophy? Questions on Milbank's Aquinas," in *Modern Theology* 15 (1999), pp. 433–445; W. HANKEY, "Why Philosophy abides for Aquinas," in *Heythorp Journal* 42 (2001), pp. 329–348.

32. Cf. C. CROCKETT, *A Theology of the Sublime*, London: Routledge, 2001; G.E. MICHALSON, "Re-reading the Kantian Tradition with Milbank," in *Journal of Religious Ethics* (2004), pp. 357–383.

33. Cf. G. DE SCHRIJVER, *Recent Theological Debates in Europe. Their Impact on Religious Dialogue*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004, pp. 37–122.

34. Cf. M. DOOLEY, "The Catastrophe of Memory. Derrida, Milbank and the (Im)Possibility of Forgiveness," in J. Caputo (ed.), *Questioning God*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001, pp. 129–149; G. HYMAN, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology. Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism*, Louisville, 2001; R. COLES, "Storied Others and Possibilities of Caritas: Milbank and Neo-Nietzschean Ethics," in *Modern Theology* 8/4 (1992), pp. 331–351.

35. Cf. for example P.D. JANZ, "Radical Orthodoxy and the New Culture of Obscurantism," in *Modern Theology* 20/3 (2004), pp. 363–405.

36. Most of them are in some way or another allied to the *'Radical Orthodoxy'* movement. But signs of respect and affinity are not limited to the circle of adherents. Rowan Williams is, for example, to a certain extent a defender of Milbank's project.

reassert the critical potentialities of her own sources of reflection. The secular is after all nothing more than the outcome of a nihilist heresy vis-à-vis orthodox Christianity. On an epistemological level this leads to the principle of intratextuality: theology has to understand reality from within its own 'text', and this without any external positioning. Therefore Milbank returns to the Fathers of the Church and to Thomas Aquinas. This guarantees him that he is still speaking from within the Christian 'text'. But it also works in the other direction. Augustine helps him to show that theology can remain intratextual in its criticism of modernity and postmodernity.

> A re-reading of the *Civitas Dei* will allow us to realize that political theology can take its critique, both of secular society and the Church, directly out of the developing Biblical Tradition, without recourse to any external supplementation. For within Augustine's text we discover the original possibility of critique that marks the western tradition, of which later Enlightenment versions are, in certain respects, abridgements and foundationalist parodies.[37]

## A. On the possibility of intratextuality

My evaluation can be formulated in terms of two questions: does he succeed in remaining intratextual? And is it desirable to remain intratextual? Let us start with the first one. Some factors raise the suspicion that his attempt to speak only from within the Christian 'text' is not wholly successful. Milbank gives the impression that he is in need of a supplement which cannot be understood internally.[38] What is symptomatic is the unthematised distinction between what he calls the Christian story and his own story about this story. Theology is for him to be understood as a kind of Christian sociology, as the explication of socio-linguistic praxis of the Church. Theology does not proceed in an apologetic or argumentative way. Theology's purpose is to "to tell again the christian mythos, pronounce again the christian logos, and call again for christian praxis."[39] The Christian story itself is then essentially a story of "preachings, journeyings, miracles, martyrdoms, vocations, marriages, icons painted and liturgies sung."[40]

---

37. TST, p. 389.
38. For a similar criticism, cf. also G. Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology. Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
39. TST, p. 381.
40. TST, p. 347.

The theologian has to confess and narrate this story. Milbank's style, however, reveals a certain problematic distance between his own story and the Christian story which the theologian has to tell. His style of writing is rather rigid and argumentative, classic and erudite. His style is almost never narrative. He defends the thesis that theology can only tell narratives, but he does not tell any stories himself. This can be read as an indication that Milbank is giving an insufficient account of the distinction between several levels of discourse. He himself does not tell the Christian story; he rather operates on a certain meta-level by apologetically defending such a story. This implies that his project depends (at least to a certain extent) on a supplement that differs from the Christian story. His discourse is a discourse about the end of modernity and secular reason and not one about "preachings, journeyings, miracles, martyrdoms. . . ." His discourse on the primacy of theology is supported by what at least partially differs from the Christian story, namely a certain philosophy.[41] By making an apologetical meta-plea, he not only appeals to a common ground[42], but he also shows himself to be determined by a non-theologically determined distance.

## B. On the desirability of intratextuality

Maybe more important is the second question, which brings us to the problem of the desirability of Milbank's logic. He presents the Christian master-narrative quite convincingly as a necessary alternative to the contemporary condition. As opposed to other postmoderns such as Lyotard, he seems to be more aware of the actual nature of neo-liberalism as a new master-narrative, and this together with

---

41. Gavin Hyman and Wayne Hankey speak, for example, about Milbank's dependency on a heideggerian-derridarian-wittgensteinian logic. Cf. G. HYMAN, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology*, p. 89.

42. This could be the desire for peace. In such a way Milbank's project reveals itself to be more modern than he admits. Leora Batnizky, for example, points out some structural parallels between Kant and Milbank. Both are in search of a domain free from coercion and both refute the Law as the domain of sin and violence. Milbank's notion of peace would be closer to that of Kant than to that of Augustine. "The notion that there is a peace, freedom or morality beyond the coercion of law, is a distinctly modern idea." L. BATNITZKY, "Love and Law, John Milbank and Hermann Cohen on the Ethical Possibilities of Secular Society," in C. CROCKETT (ed.), *Secular Theology: American Radical Theological Thought*, London: Routledge, 2001, pp. 73–91, p. 87.

his awareness of the need for a strong counter-narrative. Moreover, he knows how to surprise the reader by a certain tone of openness, especially regarding inner-Christian affairs. The Christian story is for him after all that story which truly respects difference. Christianity is the religion which does not exclude, which does not draw boundaries and which is permeated by a logic of open-ended exteriority. Nevertheless, he risks overlooking the ambiguity of this argument. As a result of his thesis that only orthodox Christianity can overcome nihilism, he installs again a dangerous logic of opposition. Internally, he may succeed in maximizing an open-ended exteriority, but finally he seems to execrate everything that falls outside the tightly drawn borders of orthodoxy. Typical here is his stress on Christianity as a *counter*-narrative, in such a way that he carries the opposition between modernity and Christianity to an extreme.[43] For Milbank, modernity is finally to be understood as "a refusal of christianity and the invention of an 'Anti-Christianity'."[44]

In the name of an ultimate peacefulness, a new kind of violence thus seems to pop up. It is to be regretted that Milbank does not seem to think this problem through and so refuses to see how his opposition between modernity and his version of Christian orthodoxy starts to function in an agonistic way. Mostly, he seems to deny the fact that his project and so the Christian story entail inherent elements of violence. Let us take as an example his relation towards Augustine's view on heresies. In his reading of the *De Civitate Dei*, he likes to demonstrate that Augustine understands the City of God (on pilgrimage) as a 'nomad city' and that the Christian story should not exclude: "Christianity should not draw boundaries."[45] Heresy then comes into being, not when a group is excluded, but when a certain group excludes itself in its stress on interiority. Milbank however dismisses at this point an interplay between interiority and exteriority together with a subtle dialectics of identity construction in the thought of Augustine. Augustine also excludes and draws boundaries. The controversy with the Pelagians, for example, can be read as a part of

---

43. Douglas Hedley therefore reads Milbank's theology as a revival of gnostic-dualistic tendencies. Cf. D. HEDLEY, "Should Divinity Overcome Metaphysics? Reflections on John Milbank's Theology beyond Secular Reason and Confessions of a Cambridge Platonist," in *The Journal of Religion* 80 (2000), pp. 271–298.
44. J. MILBANK, *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason*, Oxford, 1990, p. 280.
45. J. MILBANK, "'Postmodern Critical Augustianism': A Short Summa in Forty Two Responses to Unasked Questions," in *Modern Theology* 7/3 (1991), p. 229.

Augustine's own construction of orthodoxy. In fact, Augustine is quite honest about a certain need for heresies. They seem to have their own specific function in the divine plan: "it was predicted after all that there would be heresies and scandals so that we might develop our minds in the midst of our enemies and that in that way our faith and love might be more tested" (Ep. 185.1).[46] I will not push this so far as to link it with Carl Schmitt's friend/enemy logic, but at least this indicates that heretics are not just excluding themselves: they are part of a rigorous logic of identity construction in which there is a need for an excluded other. Therefore, the fierce battle against heretics is essentially the logical correlate of a rather closed understanding of truth and identity, and as such it undermines the open-ended exteriority which Milbank would like to attribute to Augustine's dealing with alterity and difference.[47] Milbank thus gives the impression that he is concealing an inherent violence in the story of Augustine, and this in order to conceal the violent nature of his own master-narrative. In his *Being Reconciled*, he has slightly changed his view on violence. He now resists pacifism by making a distinction between means and goals: the Christian goal of ultimate peace demands that we are in some circumstances prepared to use violent means in order to reach the goal of peace. Nevertheless, his view here cannot be called more self-conscious, because all violence is still presented as external: it is only a means that one sometimes has to use. "In certain circumstances, the young, the deluded, those relatively lacking in vision need to be coerced."[48] But who are the deluded? Who is lacking in vision? Milbank's master-narrative presents us the criteria: as a result of his agonistic-antagonistic scheme, all who do not adhere to the orthodox Christian story are ultimately nihilists who are in need of conversion.[49] Only the Christian battle is a justified

46. Cf. ook Conf. 7,19, where he quotes 1 Cor. 11,19 as follows: "For there must be heresies, so that those who are approved may become manifest among the weak."
47. What Milbank himself identifies as the traditional mode of violence, (and what he associates with paganism) thus seems to re-enter here within Christianity: "Instead of multiple difference, there is dualism here; the banished, the purged off, over against the included, the subsumed. The law of this dualism implies an ever-renewed conflict both within and without the city gates." J. MILBANK, "'Postmodern Critical Augustinianism': a Short Summa in Forty Two Responses to unasked Questions," in *Modern Theology* 7:3 (1991), 225–237, p. 229.
48. BR, p. 39.
49. Cf. J. MILBANK, "The End of Dialogue," in G. D'COSTA (ed.), *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, New York: Orbis Books, 1990, pp. 174–189.

battle, because only for Christians the name of the *eschaton* is truly peace. Milbank may labour to establish his story as the ultimate story of peace; on a structural level, it exhibits quite clearly features of a holy war ideology.

## III. Concluding remarks. The problem of tone and modernity

With the preceding reflections, I do not want to suggest that Milbank's project is too half-hearted. In my questioning of the intratextuality, I only want to indicate that he has incorporated some contemporary sensibilities. This however does not imply that an intratextual theology would be impossible. My thesis is rather the opposite: Milbank's logic shows us the danger of an intratextual approach. The putative violence is in other words the outcome of his stress on particularity in his epistemology. Of course, it would be an easy solution to comprehend the violence as just the result of forgetting the fictional status of his story. The violence is after all a result of this forgetting. But can this be a reproach in the light of his epistemology? I do not think so. In order to be consistent, he seems to be obliged to partake in this kind of forgetting. The theory, which proclaims the tradition-dependency of all rationality, obliges one to start speaking from within one's own tradition. Consequently, it is no longer possible to defend the theory of tradition-dependency as a generally valid theory.[50] The general theory is self-denying. Therefore, we can compare the theory of tradition-dependency with Wittgenstein's ladder[51]: once up, we have to throw the ladder away. As a result of this, however, the theory of tradition-dependency will nearly inevitably lead to making one's own particular story absolute. This would mean that in a well considered epistemology of tradition-dependency a particular story becomes the measure of all

---

50. Another example of this logic is the relativism-paradox: when one states that all truth is relative, then one creates the impression that one is making an exception to the idea that all truth is relative. Yet, this contradiction does not have to stay an unsurpassable. Relativism is consequently possible, at least as long as one gives up claiming that all truth is relative. One has to live as a relativist. In other words: the true relativist does not argue with a philosopher; he makes fun of him.

51. Cf. L. Wittgenstein at the end of his Tractatus: "Meine sätzen erläutern dadurch, daß sie der, welcher mir versteht, am Ende als unsinnig erkennt, wenn er durch sie—auf ihnen—über sie hinausgestiegen ist. (Er muß sozusagen die Leiter wegwerfen, nachddem er auf ihr hinaufgestiegen ist.) L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.54.

reality and that a particular story will finally be presented as coinciding with reality.

Nevertheless, we should be careful not to dismiss his thought in its entirety. In his criticism of modern formalism, he rightly points out the weaknesses of modern liberalism. A modern logic indeed risks making so-called neutral structures absolute. Even a postmodern philosophical scheme does not escape the danger of glorifying mere formal ideas in such a way that finally these ideas can be fulfilled by anything. The stress of Jacques Derrida and John Caputo on the messianic structure of all religion, risks functioning neo-conservatively. By deconstructing every concrete incarnation of the promise of salvation and justice (as ultimate), each concrete act of resistance becomes more and more difficult. The latter implies after all, to be powerful, that the story of resistance presents itself as a master-narrative; that one has the right to speak again in a 'distinguished tone'. However, inspired by Derrida, we could acknowledge the inevitability of this distinguished tone together with a critical account of the problem of such a tone. In his 1983 essay, "On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy,"[52] Derrida reacts, in dialogue with the thought of Kant, to certain apocalyptic tendencies in contemporary philosophy. At the core of his exposé stands Kant's 'Von einem neuerdings Erhobenen vornehmen Ton in der Philosophie'.[53] In this text, Kant lashes out at the logic of Milbank's favourites, the thinkers of the contra-Enlightenment. Kant mainly reproaches them for being mystagogues and for speaking in a distinguished, 'overlordly' tone. Instead of precious research into the human faculties of knowledge, they claim to have a privileged access to the supernatural, as if they are able (by means of some mysterious revelation) to look behind the screen of appearances.[54]

From the perspective of Milbank's criticism of modernity, the attractivity of these contra-Enlightenment thinkers is obvious. As a result of their stress on the particularity of faith as a necessary starting

---

52. J. DERRIDA, "On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy," in Peter Fenves (ed.), *Raising the Tone of Philosophy. Late Essays by Immanuel Kant, Transformative Critique by Jacques Derrida*, Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993, p. 117–171. Translation of «D'un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie», in P. LACOUE-LABARTHE & J.-L. NANCY (ed.), *Les fins de l'homme: à partir du travail de Jacques Derrida*, Paris: Galilée, 1983, p. 445–478.
53. I. KANT, *Von einem neuerdings Erhobenen vornehmen Ton in der Philosophie*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998.
54. I. KANT, o.c., A 389.

point, one could find here resources useful in an attempt to bridge the gap between the phenomenal and the noumenal. For Kant, of course, this would imply the death of philosophy. Their appeal to the particularity of faith and to the necessity of a leap of faith is in Kant's eyes finally to be considered as a *salto mortale*, as an illegitimate *Übersprung von Begriffen zum Undenkbaren*.[55] Therefore, in his appeal to Jacobi and Hamann, Milbank's thought could be criticized for similar reasons. Just as for these thinkers, the danger of obscurantism lurks. Nevertheless, we should be careful with this kind of critique. From a Kantian perspective, all stress on the role of particularity and tonality is finally a contamination of the posited neutrality of philosophical research. But can this neutrality be posited so easily? Is there not also in the thought of Kant a certain tonality at work which renders all absolute neutrality impossible? At this point, Derrida's essay becomes interesting. Derrida states explicitly that in the debate between the *Aufklärer* and his mystagogical opponents he prefers the former over the latter. The problem for him however is that one cannot make this distinction so easily. "Each of us is the mystagogue and the Aufklärer of an other."[56] The mystagogue tries to lay bare the unthematized presuppositions of the *Aufklärer*. But as such, he is already taken up in a process of *Aufklärung*. The *Aufklärer* in his turn also speaks in a particular tone. Like the mystagogue he is involved in a process of reading the traces of truth. The main difference between both parties is that Kant prefers to speak in a more modest tone, in the construction of a rather formal metaphysics. But as such he remains metaphysical in his construction of a transcendental eschatology. Kant replaces one eschatology for another.

For Derrida, both a distinguished *schwärmerische* Tone and complete atonality implies the death of philosophy. The fear of this death is what both parties share. They both accuse one another of castrating reason.[57] Derrida therefore makes a plea for a philosophical polyphony, because it would be impossible to indicate at exactly what point one

---

55. *Ibid.*, A 405.
56. J. DERRIDA, "On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy," p. 142.
57. The reproach was originally directed by Johann Georg Schlosser at Kant's address. Schlosser was a *Gefühlsphilosoph* who had just edited a new translation of Plato, a translation which provoked Kant to write his essay. Kant then turns the accusation against Schlosser. For Schlosser, Kant castrates reason by making an abstraction of the particular and emotional order. For Kant, Schlosser castrates reason by downplaying the role of universality.

overrates the role of particularity. Moreover, demystification also has its limits. Let us take the example of the moral law. From a Kantian perspective, the law should be pure: on the level of motivation one has to make a total abstraction of the pathological order (level of inclinations). But the question remains whether our access to the moral law can happen independently of the pathological order. Kant himself was aware of this problem. In his *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, he deals extensively with the problem of the *'Triebfedern der reinen praktischen Vernunft'*. Furthermore, he explicitly denies the possibility of a direct access to ourselves as noumenal beings. Such an access would imply the end of the moral struggle; it would reduce us to automatons.

Yet Kant sometimes does not adequately enough take into account the 'syrupiness' of the pathological. We are never totally free from our tendencies. We can never fully escape our being rooted in the particular and pathological. With Derrida, we can therefore understand the noumenal as parasitic on the order of phenomenality. Noumenality itself relies on ontic carriers of experience. Applied to the moral law: this is unconceivable without a minimal narrative development. However, Derrida does not reduce the order of the noumenal and universal to the order of the phenomenal and particular. He wants to respect the tension that exists between both. He wants to demonstrate that both orders rely on one another, but that they can never be reduced to one another. So the Enlightenment should be understood as elliptically structured. The Enlightenment is divided within itself, constituted by two focal centres which give the overall structure an aporetical outlook. The two focal centres can be associated with a logic of particularity on the one side and a logic of universality on the other side: there is nothing outside of contextuality; nevertheless, we are marked by an unconditional appeal to transcend every context. This tension makes it possible to criticise both all presumed pureness of abstract and formal philosophies and every attempt to reduce claims of truth to its context.

Let us return now to Milbank. He resists the deconstructive approach of Derrida as nihilistic. In line with the rest of postmodern philosophy, he would not succeed in overcoming modern formalism. More specifically, he reproaches Derrida for remaining too Hegelian.[58] Derrida postpones every synthesis and prolongs the logic of negativity, but he remains caught within a dialectic logic. But is this necessarily

---

58. Cf. TST, p. 310.

such a problem? Indeed, Derrida gives the impression of being a post-modern Hegelian. And as such, he knows, as a result of his eschatological correction, how to avoid all triumphalism. But the latter correction seems to be largely absent in Milbank's thought. The 'yet-to-come' is here discredited in favour of the 'already'. We can therefore turn accusation of (modern) Hegelianism against Milbank himself. In Milbank's thought, clear dialectical traces can be found: in his attempt to overcome the duality of reason and faith, and nature and grace, he remains an heir of Hegel. Moreover, his attempt easily results in an *ad hoc* synthesis, for it is a synthesis identified with his own master-narrative. It's therefore all too easy to reject deconstruction as modern formalism and to leave us with an either/or option: either *Radical Orthodoxy* or postmodern nihilist philosophy. Deconstruction is essentially a sophisticated way to deal with particular truths of faith. Deconstruction refuses all attempts to make them absolute, but understands them as the necessary carriers (and so always deconstructable in their truth claims) of a universal logic of truth and justice. It is to be regretted here that Milbank finally (despite his attempt to overcome the duality of nature and grace) seems unable to escape a duality of salvation and damnation. Maybe he is not dialectical enough. A healthy dialectics challenges us to question our own position time and time again and to render account of the complex interplay of the self and the other. It constantly tries to avoid two seductions: on one side it refuses to absorb the other into the story of the self, on the other side it refuses to hypostasize as unbridgeable the distance that separates us from the other. From the perspective of a dialectical postmodern stance, there can be no reduction, nor any unbridgeable asymmetry.