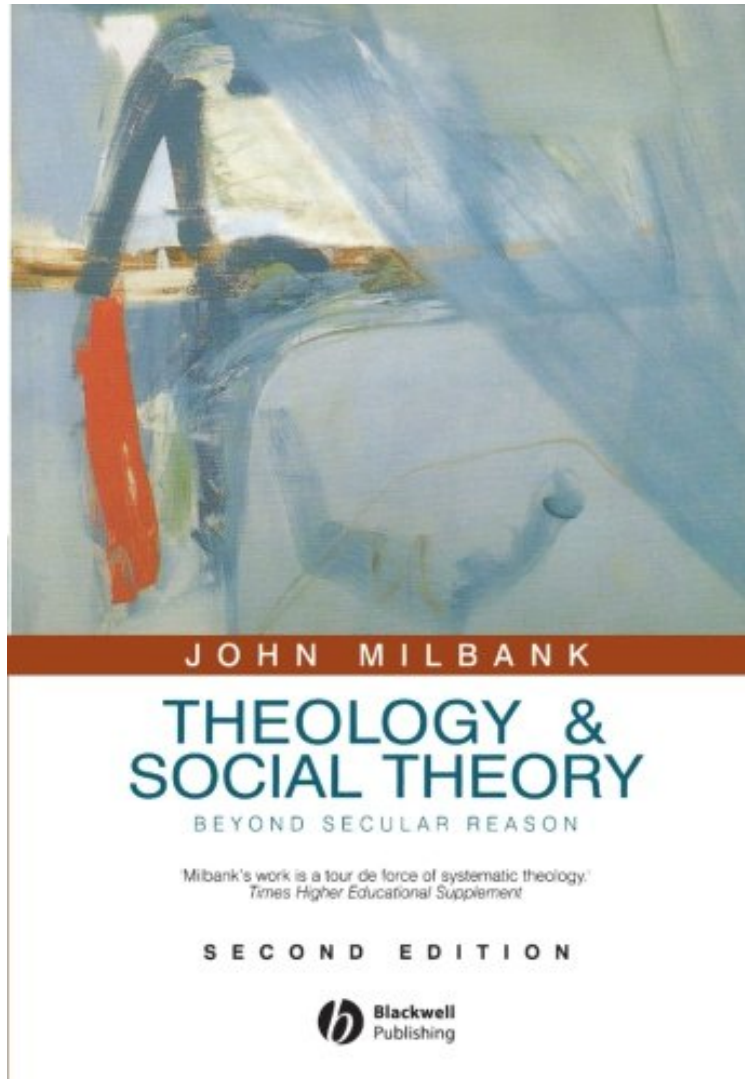


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Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason

John Milbank

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John Milbank : Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Revision or Retraction? Extended Review of Preface to 2nd Edition By Charles W. Murry In this revised edition of John Milbank's seminal 1990 publication, a publication itself which has served as a founding document for that theological sensibility known as Radical Orthodoxy, Milbank has left largely unaltered the central thesis of the first edition. That thesis, which I explicated in a review of the first edition

(For a more favorable review of the main text, please see it on .com for the 1st edition), hinges around the notion of mythos and the modern/postmodern problematic and perpetual dissembling regarding secularity's own unfounded foundations. These foundations, Milbank contends, can be deconstructed into an ontology violence, best characterized by force and counterforce. Milbank wishes to lift the veil on the pretensions of reason as such ("reason in the mode of cold regard" as he calls it) by persuading that this ontology is unnecessary and, what is more, not the only one at hand. Unfortunately, the one at hand has also fallen prey to this very nihilistic ontology and this fall constitutes the modern "pathos of theology," which Milbank says is a false humility. Thus, Milbank wishes not only to invalidate modern social theory, but call into question the modern practice of theology. These goals remain in the revised edition. What is new is the preface in which Milbank attempts to address some of the most common criticisms of the first edition and offer "clarifications" and "a certain limited mode of apologetic" (xvi). What criticisms does Milbank address? Milbank counters what he perceives to be the predominant complaint among sociologists: that his project was one of rejecting sociological reductionism. Milbank contends that sociologists have misunderstood his point. This, however, will come as cold comfort as Milbank drives the missed point home: Milbank is not arguing against reductionism in sociology, but arguing against the whole idea of sociology itself. Milbank, as if to make this remark palatable to sociologists, remarks that "sociology is an exploded paradigm" and that the only ones who have not caught on to this are "theologians themselves--who are still so often belated" (xii). Of course, this leaves one wondering whom Milbank's audience is if most sociologists have conceded to defeat. Yet, it seems unlikely that sociologists see their discipline as an "exploded paradigm." In response to the banalities of such assertions, I merely refer Milbank to the public library or classroom sociology curriculum whose primary texts (and lectures) do not doubt the validity of their enterprise, despite (in spite?) of postmodern philosophical ramblings (can we thank the instrumentalizing of reason and specialization and concomitant compartmentalizing of knowledge for this?). Milbank seems to make a mistake similar to the first edition of TST, namely in an overestimation of consensus--there was never quite as much methodological consensus as his narrative seem to indicate nor is there now quite as much consensus that sociology is an "exploded paradigm." Milbank notes further protests from the dialectical tradition (he has mind Gillian Rose) but reiterates that despite calls emancipation there simply is no ground of freedom and of mutual recognition of another's freedom so that there is "no surety against history resuming its sinister inventiveness" (xiii). Further protests from 'left-Nietzscheanism' object to the accusation that their discourse upholds nihilism and ontological violence: Milbank says they still smuggle mode of stoicism or Kantianism because "mere formal tolerance" was not enough: "The attempt to bend their diagnoses of the historical sway of arbitrary power to the cause of 'emancipation' was never truly plausible" (TST2, xiii). Also says that "the most radical thinker of difference never pretended anything other than that it was grounded in an 'ontology of violence'" (xiv). These responses by Milbank to his critics bring to mind Robert Schreier's own criticism that not only is Milbank's approach "shocking in its repudiation of modernity" but that it is "sometimes a little annoying in its dismissive tone." The dismissive tone elides into clarifications and a limited mode of apologetic when Milbank addresses another salient critique of his work (and, by implication, Radical Orthodoxy): that Milbank's narrative itself is yet another manifestation of violence. Kevin Hector has addressed this issue, attempting to provide covenantal theology correctives to what he perceives as a too abstract notion of God and creation. This abstract nature of Milbank's work is subject of criticism in later works as well and has negative effects on the implantation of Milbank's practical theology (see R. R. Reno's critic of "Being Reconciled" where "Jesus saves by his absence..." as well as Wendy Dackson's critique that Milbank's theology only seems to work in a world where there is a single, normative reading of Christianity--but there is not). Milbank attempts to clarify his own narrative at this point by asking "how to choose between these two alternative genealogical strategies? My book seemed to suggest that there are no grounds for such a choice" (TST2, xvi). We would do well at this point to recall that his book seemed to do more than suggest by stating that "these fundamental intellectual shifts are...no more rationally justifiable than the Christian position themselves" (TST, 1). That fact notwithstanding, Milbank proceeds to note that "the careful reader will realize that throughout the book the attitude towards 'secular reason' is never as negative as it appears to be on the surface" (TST2, xiv). Milbank then begins to set the stage for asserting that there are grounds for a reasonable choice. He says: "First of all, from the point of view my ontology, the 'choice' for peaceful analogy and the Augustinian metanarrative is not really an ungrounded decision, but a 'seeing' by a truly-desiring reason of the truly desirable" (TST2, xvi). The first sign of trouble is: "from my point of view." What is a "true" desire and what is a "reason" is precisely what is in question. If this is all that Milbank means, he has proceeded no further than Lindbeck and suffers the same criticisms that Lindbeck is vulnerable to, including those made by Milbank. Milbank has neither moved beyond secular reason nor offered an alternative different than George Lindbeck's "intrasystematic truth" which is at odds with Thomistic notions of truth and knowledge. Milbank then notes that the second form of clarification (which is in the apologetic mode) appeals to the "inchoate current human preference for peace over violence that is both innate (from my metaphysical point of view) and a post-Christian residue, so also I can appeal to a certain bias towards reason rather than unreason (present for similar reasons)" (xvi). Again, the first sign of trouble is: "from my metaphysical point of view." Milbank is not simply engaging in a "certain limited mode of apologetic," but entirely changing the logic of TST; he has gone from saying that the secular, nihilistic, ontology of violence and the ontology

of peace are fundamental in just such a way that theoretical expositions will never convince the adherent of one tradition to change to that of another to now saying that the difference is between reason and unreason. This is just the criticism he charges against MacIntyre, saying that there just is no way that one tradition can be rationally presented to another so as to convince that other to change allegiances. This is the foundation for Milbank's description of what constitutes a mythos. The problems with this change are multiple and complex. One must then ask if his criticisms of Alasdair MacIntyre are justified given this change, and if they are, how is the entire program of TST not undermined? A further problem is how Milbank is using "unreason." The sense is that it either means "no-reason" or that it means "unreasonable." In the former case, which would be consistent with nihilistic violence/chaos, which must be managed by a fabricated reason, we are simply back to the choice of whether the universe is either meaningful or meaningless--but that means we are back right where we started and Milbank's clarification offers nothing more than the tautologies he railed against in TST. In the latter case, the immediate question arises of the criteria or standards by which "unreasonable" and "reasonable" are to be adjudicated. Milbank's argument in TST just is that there are no such standards and that this is the belief of "pure reason" or, as Milbank refers to it, "reason in the mood of cold regard" (xvii). What Milbank means by "unreason" is further elaborated upon in his assertion that nihilism is the conclusion, regardless presentation, of "pure reason" and constitutes the "ontological reign of non-sense or unreason" (xvii). It is here that Milbank gives further clarification about what he means by 'unreason.' Unfortunately, this is about as much clarification as we can squeeze out of Milbank and here the use remains somewhat still ambiguous. Here we see that Milbank takes as synonyms "non-sense" and "unreason." We could imagine from a theological point of view, one in which fallen nature and sin are salient factors of which to take account in how human beings come to apprehend truth and their collective ends, that "unreason" intimates the defiant attitude of the sinful creature. Unreason is the refusal of the creature to truly desire. Milbank would surely assert that this is what unreason is, but unreason will not do all the work to which Milbank puts it. In equating unreason with non-sense, Milbank immediately collapses the distinction between the theological perspective in which truly-desiring reason is directed to God and "reason in the mood of cold regard." Why is this the case? It is because non-sense is only non-sense according to some standard, but what standard is Milbank invoking? If it is an aesthetic appeal of a "better" narrative, then Milbank has only smuggled back in his original assertions in the guise of "reason" and "unreason." In other words, tautologous affirmations of tautologies, to use Milbank's own criticism. At best, if the reason and unreason (non-sense) is just that judged by internal and systematic consistency within a particular mythos, then Milbank, again, has asserted nothing other than his original theses: there can be no reason for one to switch allegiance, regardless of the arguments put forward. If Milbank has abandoned this assertion, then he has abandoned the heart of TST, and if this is the case, then in large part, his criticisms of that other confused voice of Alasdair MacIntyre (the benign form of postmodernism) must be abandoned as well. Milbank's limited mode of apologetic is certainly that: limited. It is, at best, inconsistent and evasive of an actual clarification. At worst it is misleading. Given these "clarifications," Milbank is able to argue that the "Catholic perspective saves not just the human bias towards peace and order, but also the human bias towards reason. Reason, for Catholic tradition, 'goes all the way down'...For this reason a full 'rationalism' is linked with a Biblical mythos alone" (TST2, xvii). With this statement, Milbank continues to change (if he were to hold this line) the fundamental nature of TST. Hinted at above was that the concept of mythos has been abandoned by Milbank in his "clarifications" and "limited mode of apologetic." The fact that Milbank's position has become somewhat incoherent is given in the fact that he has abrogated the defining characteristics he gave to the notion of mythos in TST in an attempt to resolve the criticism that his ontology of peaceful difference is simply one choice among others. That incoherence is crystallized when, given this abrogation, he continues to use the notion of mythos without qualification in his assertion that it is only in and through the Biblical mythos where reason is fully rational (one should also be weary when arguments invoke the word "Biblical"). Is there any irony then when the obvious conclusion is presented by Milbank that to "choose" his position, that is, his particular rendering of "the Augustinian metanarrative" is to "elect reason" (there are conflicting interpretations of this narrative so the question also remains: who is the authoritative interpreter of Augustine? Milbank takes himself to be). Tautology again! While in TST Milbank explicitly rejected argument, here it "becomes possible to argue." But some would reason that the facts of nature simply force one to the conclusion, because reasonable, that at bottom, there is no-sense in the cosmos, perhaps even that there is only violence, only chaos. Indeed, someone would argue that that reason compels one to recognize meaninglessness. There are evolutionary explanations of why the human mind has a "bias...towards meaning." These arguments may (indeed, they should) be convincing--to an Augustinian in particular or Christians in general, but they will not be, in accordance with Milbank's own understanding of the notion of mythos, to anyone else. They might be pleasing to hear; they might be more suitable to the mind's aesthetic palate, but so are some lies, so is the more fantastical tale told in Yann Martel's fantasy novel *The Life of Pi*. A final note on the Preface to the second edition and the way in which it undermines the original work: Milbank makes the concession that in all the distortions in Christianity, distortions which he cannot deny, that there "remains truth in all these distortions and even that, just as Irenaeus learned much from Valentinus, the distortions develop better certain aspects of orthodoxy which orthodoxy must then later recoup" (TST2, xv). This runs completely counter to the arguments in TST or at least makes them no longer intelligible. Distortion becomes almost

indistinguishable from order: What is distortion other than error or sin? Yet, "the distortions develop better certain aspects of orthodoxy..." Privations, negativity (which, in distorting, they conceal), do a "better" job at revealing the truth. How does Milbank write such a sentence without immediately recognizing his own criticism of the "mythical generator" of dialectical inquiry, of his critique and rejection of the claim that truth is best revealed through concealment? If distortions (concealments) do a better job at revealing "certain aspects" of the truth, than Milbank has relinquished his original TST claims. Fortunately, much of the rest of the text of TST remains unaltered with the exception of factual and grammatical changes. There are a few areas where language has been toned as well. For example, in the original publication Milbank asserts that "true society implies absolute consensus, agreement in desire, and entire harmony among its members," which is "exactly...what the Church provides" (TST, 402). In the revised edition, the same sentence has omitted the word "absolute" as a qualifier of "consensus" and "entire" as a qualifier of "harmony" and added the word "begins" with regard to the activity of the Church (TST, 406). I can only assume that some of what has motivated the concessions in the Preface has trickled down into the body here and there. Given the minor changes in the main body of TST, the Preface to the Second edition is best discarded in favor of the still powerful critique Milbank provides of secular reason's self-repeating enthymemes, that is, secularity's own mythos. Mythos is more than this, obviously, because it applies and is applied by Milbank to Christianity as well as modernity and the modern and postmodern conceptions of social theory. However, the fact that while it is true that it applies equally to Christianity, or any narrative for that matter, fundamentally, it becomes a term of accusation, of polemic, in Milbank's treatise on the foundations of modern social theory, a theory whose very foundations and perpetually positivist stance (even when it purportedly takes an anti-positivist stance) means to present the face of a non-mythos. Insofar as social theory does this, it presents a mask, and all its reasoned conclusions, its acceptable-because-reasonable-conclusions, are the result of its dissembling vis--vis its own pagan-ess presuppositions. Milbank's use of the term mythos and application to social theory intends to lift the mask, expose the dissembling of secular reason, and thus undermine those very foundations and positivist assumptions. The underlying mythos, of course, is the one already noted, an ontology of violence: this is the unstated assumption in the enthymeme of secular reason. Thus the point for Milbank is that the Church, that Christianity, tells a better story than that of secular modernity whose story is founded upon an ontology of violence and whose narratives inevitably incorporate that violence in an account of human nature, human teleology, and the social context in which human nature is played out in pursuit of its telos. It is a narrative where violence and power are intrinsic and therefore ineliminable dimensions of the human story and, consequently, includes inevitable irruptions and perpetual manifestations of violence and power, sometimes masked, sometimes unmasked. This is what TST should be known for.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. THE 1ST COMPLETE "PHRONEOLOGY" EVER WRITTEN:By barrybTHE 1ST COMPLETE "PHRONEOLOGY" EVER WRITTEN:What is a "Phroneology"? It is a "Theology of Phronesis". And "Phronesis" is equal to "the art of standing-in at the threshold of praxis" (my definition). Milbank has dedicated 450 pages to a complete explication of this motivational realm that informs the individual's "psyche" or "soul" and prepares it for the differentiation of "praxis".Secular postmodernism already has emphasized the "motivational-body-state" in the sub-consciousness and it has received additional support in cognitive and neuro-psychology. But these secular dimensions have no objective criteria for critiquing the motivational-body-state. Instead; we are confronted by "traces" of difference or "otherness" that we do our best to inscribe within our body state; and we rely on "intersubjectivity" and reciprocal feedback from praxis in order to erase or re-inscribe the "blank-slate" of this motivational base that never really reaches a normative consensus.For Milbank, the primary culprit of this deterioration of "transcendence" has been liberalism and "secular-postmodernism" he proposes a three-step process to address this problem and to re-claim the realm of "Phronesis" for Christianity and for a new narrative of transcendence, which he labels "Meta-Narrative". This process consists of: DECONSTRUCTION - TRACING - ENCODING.1st we start with DECONSTRUCTION: this is the deconstruction of "liberalism and secularism" in order to free-up important fundamental concepts that have been concealed. They need to be unveiled and have new life breathed into them. Specifically these concepts are: LOGOS, VIRTUE, PHRONESIS.The most significant "negative" element that will be revealed in this deconstruction is the current presence of the "capitalist economy" as a destructive model for society that emphasizes "harmony-of-utility" as the only morality. It is an ethical-nightmare; and we all live in it.2nd, we address the idea of TRACING the freed-up concepts that can contribute to a "linguistic-idealism", coupled with Christian "virtue".This leads us to the obvious conclusion that this linguistic model can only be exscribed as "NARRATIVE". And; Milbank says it also forces us to negate the tendency in secular-postmodernism, which practices phenomenological reduction to "Noemata" that constitute spiritual experience. Milbank says "No"; as Christians we couple this narrative with the underlying conviction of a finitude related to "Infinite-Telos".3rd, we address the process of "ENCODING" this linguistic model, by writing our own "meta-narrative"Now comes the fun part: Milbank accepts "Dialectic" functionally; but it cannot be accepted as the foundation of "Alethia-truth". We do employ a three stage dialectic in our "encoding" project, which consists of: NEGATION - PRESERVATION - TRANSCENDENCE.NEGATION: negates the axioms of "nihilism" and "positivism"; in order to clean the slate before proceeding.PRESERVATION: clings to these three concepts we freed-up: LOGOS - VIRTUE - PHRONESIS LOGOS: includes doxa-signs, bearing witness, and faith-

relation. VIRTUE: means charity, forgiveness, and patience. PHRONESIS: establishes the priority of the "self-governed-soul" TRANSCENDENCE: is the actual moment of writing the meta-narrative, while involved in dialogue at the composition-threshold. And there is a referential and foundational reference for this construction: the "Exemplary-Narrative-of-Christ's-life". We write the narrative to inform our "praxis" with this originary narrative as our focal-point. And this in-turn informs our "praxis" and also falls back into the "psyche" to inscribe our motivational base; called the realm of "PHRONESIS" A masterful work indeed; and highly recommended to all who desire to stay current with postmodernism, while reinforcing their Christian convictions. 5 stars.....0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By CustomerGenious! Every serious thinker should read it!

This is a revised edition of John Milbanks masterpiece, which sketches the outline of a specifically theological social theory. The Times Higher Education Supplement wrote of the first edition that it was a tour de force of systematic theology. It would be churlish not to acknowledge its provocation and brilliance. Featured in The Church Times 100 Best Christian Books" Brings this classic work up-to-date by reviewing the development of modern social thought. Features a substantial new introduction by Milbank, clarifying the theoretical basis for his work. Challenges the notion that sociological critiques of theology are scientific. Outlines a specifically theological social theory, and in doing so, engages with a wide range of thinkers from Plato to Deleuze. Written by one of the worlds most influential contemporary theologians and the author of numerous books.

Praise for the First edition "Milbank's work is a tour de force of systematic theology. It would be churlish not to acknowledge its provocation and brilliance." Times Higher Education Supplement "The thesis is relatively simple, its orchestration is stunning in scope as well as in harmonies." Modern Theology "John Milbanks sprawling, ambitious and intellectually demanding book is in a class of its own." Studies in Christian Ethics "John Milbank has written a masterful review of the development of modern social thought that at the same time offers a criticism of its dominant paradigms and suggests inherent limits on its accomplishments." Journal of Religion Praise for the Second Edition Theology and Social Theory has proven to be a bombshell We are, therefore, extremely fortunate to have this second edition with Milbanks dazzling new Preface. Re-reading this book is always a pleasure, because it is filled with surprises that force thought. Stanley Hauerwas, Duke University "When the first edition was published the reaction was one of shock. Now, fifteen years on, the shock has worn off; more and more people are questioning the universal competency of secular reason. But this make all the more important the publication of this second edition. Milbank develops an alternative which has been steadily developing and enriching in the intervening years." Charles Taylor, McGill University "[Theology and Social Theory] remains a dense, challenging and elusive masterpiece of a book, which has lost none of its power to intrigue and repel in equal measure." Times Literary Supplement, Sept 2006 "This second edition is a vital aid to any reader who wishes to understand more fully how Theology and Social Theory relates to Milbank's continued publications and radically orthodox sensibilities." Theological Book "An influential and important book instructive for students in that it analyses and challenges contemporary assumptions about society and religion." Teaching Theology Religion From the Back Cover In modern times, the social sciences have sought to explain religion from a neutral, secular vantage-point. In response, theology has tried to legitimate itself by building upon social scientific conclusions. In this acclaimed book, John Milbank suggests that both enterprises are compromised by the theological and anti-theological assumptions built into the social sciences themselves. This new edition of Theology and Social Theory brings John Milbanks classic work fully into line with his most recent views and is laid out in an easier-to-read format. It features a substantial new preface in which Milbank answers his critics by defending and further elaborating his metahistorical vision. Provocative and well-argued, this updated classic from one of the worlds leading theologians offers a comprehensive treatment of the relation between theology and social theory, all the way from Plato to Deleuze. About the Author John Milbank is Professor of Religion, Politics and Ethics at the University of Nottingham and one of the most influential contemporary theologians. He is also the author of The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture (Blackwell, 1996).