BEYOND SECULARISM: RADICAL ORTHODOXY IN CONVERSATION WITH 
RADICAL DEMOCRACY

by

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ABSTRACT

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Beyond Secularism: Radical Orthodoxy in Conversation with Radical Democracy

Thesis Directed by Associate Professors Horst Mewes and Steve Vanderheiden

In my dissertation, I set for myself three basic tasks. First, I try to show that much radical democratic theory results in nihilism. Second, I draw out the consequences of nihilism. Put briefly, the major consequence of nihilism is the unreasonable character of almost all of our deeply held moral and political beliefs, such as the dignity of human beings, the value of democracy, the importance of rights, and so forth. The nihilistic conclusion, then, is that the West cannot justify its own values. Third, and most importantly, I examine how the conclusion of nihilism might be avoided. Is there an alternative, better account we can provide that is not nihilistic? I find such an account in the contemporary school of Christian theology known as Radical Orthodoxy, represented by such theorists and theologians as John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, Graham Ward, and others. Radical Orthodoxy endeavors to recover and renew insights from the orthodox Christian tradition in order to avoid the conclusion of nihilism and to rethink ontology, secularism, ethics, and politics.
Dedicated to Laura Jean Marholz
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The popular socialist magazine *Jacobin* recently celebrated the late UK Labour MP Tony Benn by posting the following quotation on social media: “We tried to make capitalism work with good and humane Labour governments and we didn't succeed - because it can't work. It rests on injustice, lives on inequality and if you try to modify them it turns on you, cuts back your gains and throws you back to where you started.” To begin this study I wish to focus specifically on this claim about “injustice.” The claim that capitalism rests on injustice is made often, even as a matter of course, on the radical left today. The problem that is at the heart of my dissertation, with which I am most occupied and which opens up all other questions, is what it means to make this claim, and whether it is possible to supply a philosophical defense of this claim, or whether instead it is always an arbitrary claim, of which it cannot be said that it is true or false. Although of course I discuss other matters in this work, it is this problem that is at its heart.

In the rest of this introduction I shall briefly explain what my project is about, explain why I take it to be significant, and also orient it with respect to bodies of literature to which it relates but upon which I do not focus in the four following chapters. Here I want to describe the project of course but also to contextualize it as much as I can. I hope that this will help render the project as a whole clearer. First I shall describe my dissertation project, and next I shall attempt to explain briefly why I find this project significant, the larger universe of problems into which my project fits, and finally the politics of this project as I see them. I shall then discuss my view of the meaning of political philosophy and how my project relates to this conception – I see this task as worthwhile, if not necessary, in a political philosophy dissertation. Finally, I shall more generally discuss the
philosophical background to my dissertation, especially noting the relation of my project to Marxism. Throughout I am in part simply attempting to explain what I am doing in this work. Without this statement of context, the choice of this project might seem somewhat arbitrary.

**Overview of the Project**

I think of my dissertation as a sustained dialogue between two theoretical orientations. On one side stand those I call radical democratic theorists, among them Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, William Connolly, Linda Zerilli, and a whole host of theorists influenced by the French thinkers, especially Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Derrida. Like the broader political Left, it is fair to say that what divides these thinkers is as important as anything that unites them. After all, Laclau and Mouffe seem to be primarily influenced by Gramsci, Connolly by Deleuze and Nietzsche, and Zerilli by Kant, Wittgenstein, and Arendt. This strange collection of thinkers does not constitute a neat whole, yet I argue that radical democrats share a number of important beliefs. First and foremost, radical democrats are of the Left, yet they are not traditional Marxists or traditional socialists. In politics, radical democrats tend to be fonder of the new social movements, of identity politics, of postmodern forms of race and gender politics, than either Marxists or Christian socialists. Second, these thinkers tend to favor an ontology in which things are, at bottom, mobile, shifting, different, and so forth, rather than stable, frozen, fixed, or whatever. Third, these thinkers tend at least to be accused of relativism or nihilism or something of this sort, such that much ink is devoted to sophisticated arguments intending to show they are not, in fact, relativists. Fourth, these thinkers tend to be, in some sense, secular, at least insofar as few, if any, are firmly committed to any particular religious tradition. Doubtless, one could press
against any of these descriptions, one could show that this or that self-styled radical democrat doesn’t meet these criteria, one could problematize this whole interpretation, but none of that worries me much, because I think that, as a broad sketch, this picture makes sense (it makes sense to me, in any case). In the academy, individuation is necessary in order to advance one’s career as a researcher, so any sketch of a purported school to which many thinkers belong will always be fraught with peril, but the effort to speak of commonalities among thinkers still strikes me as a worthy endeavor, not least because it allows one to make more general and perhaps more important claims.

The other half of the sustained dialogue, for which I shall argue in favor throughout the dissertation, is Radical Orthodoxy (RO), and those thinkers associated with it, among them John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, Graham Ward, Daniel Bell Jr., and William T. Cavanaugh, among others. In this work I spend by far the most time discussing Milbank because he is the founder of RO. In broad terms, the central aim of RO is to advance critiques of all aspects of modern society from an orthodox Christian perspective. RO “visits sites in which secularism has invested heavily—aesthetics, politics, sex, the body, personhood, visibility, space—and resituates them from a Christian standpoint; that is, in terms of the Trinity, Christology, the Church and the Eucharist.”¹ This move is not made out of nostalgia for a bygone age, namely Christendom. Instead, it is undertaken from the belief that the West has become nihilistic, from the belief that nihilism is the spiritless spirit of the age, and, furthermore, that much recent philosophy is itself nihilistic. In the words of Flannery O’Connor, nihilism is today “the gas you breathe.” Nihilism is a complex concept, and I’ll elaborate on what I mean by it below. For now, the following quotation

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from Milbank’s opus should suffice: “nihilism is the conclusion of ‘pure reason’ (reason in the mood of cold regard), not just to the void or to ontological violence, but also to the ontological reign of non-sense or unreason. This indeed was Nietzsche’s central tragic crux: *fully honest Western reason realizes that reason itself is but a pathetic human projection.*”2 The project of RO, then, is not only to propose an antithesis to nihilism, but also to save reason from reason’s own self-destructive tendencies—and more generally, the project of RO is to attempt to forge a way to rescue Western modernity, Western Enlightenment, from itself. For RO, postmodernism is not so much a rejection of modernity but a project whereby the latter is brought to its logical conclusion. (Again, here I am simply attempting to describe how RO conceives of itself). In this respect, in terms of its ethico-political aims, so to speak, RO bears important affinity with Charles Taylor. Indeed, Milbank says that “[i]n many ways one could attach the label ‘radically orthodox’ to Taylor with more justification that to those, including myself, who have traded intellectually under this logo.”3

A central concept of RO is an ontology of participation in God. This ontological vision “refuses any reserve of created territory, while allowing finite things their own integrity.”4 In other words, RO stresses that creation must be understood as participating in God—in a Catholic theological spirit, drawing especially upon the Ressourcement theologians such as Henri de Lubac, Jean Danielou, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and others. This sense of participation in God does not thrust upon a manifold world an ugly monism—indeed, this is rather accomplished through the separation of the world and divinity (and the eventual elimination of the latter), through what

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2 John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), xvii. Emphasis mine. As the italicized clause is meant to highlight, for Milbank postmodernism is in fact more “fully honest” human reason—more suspicious and critical than prior philosophies.
Catherine Pickstock calls “immanentism”. This ontology of participation results in a kind of teleological suspension of the ethical, but not just in Kierkegaard’s sense: “only transcendence, which ‘suspends’ these things in the sense of interrupting them, ‘suspends’ them also in the other sense of upholding their relative worth over-against the void.”\(^5\) Put otherwise, the orthodox Christian vision that RO advances makes matter matter.\(^6\) The most persistent claim of the thinkers associated with RO, then, is that it is only through this participation in divinity that renders the world meaningful, significant, and so forth. I elaborate on RO’s ontology in chapter one.

Why have I chosen these two theoretical orientations as partners in a sustained dialogue or argument? The answer is that radical democrats and RO theologians, for all their differences (to be extrapolated throughout this dissertation), share a crucial assumption, which is that somehow modernity constitutes a problem that cries out for resolution. At the risk of sounding somewhat flippant, these two orientations make for excellent sparring partners because each generally agrees with the postmodern criticisms levied against Enlightenment thought in recent decades. Put otherwise, one might say both orientations borrow heavily from Nietzsche and his French followers. Both orientations basically agree that the supposedly firm ground of Enlightenment foundationalism has been shown to be sand, and both basically agree that the 20\(^{th}\) century exploded old sureties concerning Western concepts such as justice, freedom, equality, and so forth. Both agree with Arendt that these are today hollow husks, emptied of content. Another way of putting this point is to suggest that, negatively at least, radical democrats and RO theologians find much with which to agree. Of course, the positive vision favored by each orientation differs markedly, and indeed Milbank comes to his own positive vision partly through as thoroughgoing criticism of

\(^5\) Ibid.  
the postmodernists, who, as I shall soon show, constitute the intellectual forebears of radical democratic thought.

Not only philosophically but also politically radical democrats share much with RO theologians. Both orientations find themselves on the political Left, so to speak, at least insofar as both criticize liberal-democratic capitalism and urge readers to seek alternatives. Both live in that shadowy space once dominated by Marxism and which is now a hodge-podge of anti-capitalist schools of thought.

Thus each orientation, radical democracy and RO, is politically and philosophically radical: seeking to go to the root of the problem with today’s Western politics and the philosophies which apparently gave rise to it. In this way, I think a sustained dialogue between radical democrats and RO theologians has the potential to bear much fruit and to raise important questions. For each, we are in the midst of something like a prolonged crisis, though each favors markedly different ways of resolving this crisis.

In this dialogue between radical democrats and RO, I do not seek somehow to prove definitively the truth of RO and the falsity of the theory or theories of the radical democrats. The perspective of RO itself disallows such a conclusion. For RO, nihilism—which the radical democrats, again, cannot escape, in my view—is not some asinine picture of the world at which one should laugh. To the contrary, it is only because nihilism is such an attractive vision of the world, such an apparently reasonable doctrine, almost common-sensical in some circles today, that RO devotes so much intellectual energy confronting it and arguing against it. It would be foolish, I think, to envision nihilism simply as a soul-sucking, depressing worldview. The reality is that for many individuals today, nihilism seems to be liberating, allowing us to conceptualize the world as it is presented to us, especially the political and moral world, as so many fictions which we may
rearrange however we should like, if only we could demonstrate sufficiently their fictional nature. To argue against nihilism is not an easy task, especially because, as RO also affirms, there simply is no neutral language or (in Rorty’s terms) vocabulary to which we may refer which may serve to place differing philosophical arguments and perspectives on an even playing field. In Milbank’s words, “no such fundamental account, in the sense of something neutral, rational and universal, is really available. It is theology itself that will have to provide its own account of the final causes at work in human history, on the basis of its own particular, and historically specific faith.”7 Because there is no neutral reason to which to refer, Milbank contends that “a purely dialectical method” of arguing rationally or reasonably against nihilism is inadequate; instead, “the only possible response to nihilism is to affirm one’s allegiance to a particular tradition, and derive an ontology from the implicit assumptions of its narrative forms.”8 Consequently, Milbank contends that the only move available to him is to “out-narrate” nihilism—he hopes he “can persuade people – for reasons of ‘literary taste’ – that Christianity offers a much better story.”9 Milbank is aware, I think, that this is not an immediately attractive methodology, if one may call it that. But once we give up the illusion of a neutral reason accessible to all and utilizable by all, perhaps we must settle for Milbank’s option, or at least something like it.

In my project, in the sustained dialogue I host in the dissertation, I pursue something like that which Milbank suggests, i.e. a preference for the Christian vision for reasons of literary taste, but I prefer to explain why I prefer it using a concept of Taylor’s instead. I wish to make use of Taylor’s best account (BA) principle. The claim I make throughout the dissertation is that RO simply offers a better account of the human situation or the human domain (as Taylor calls it) than

7 Milbank, Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason, 382.
8 Ibid., 262.
9 Ibid., 331.
radical democracy. Importantly, echoing Milbank, this is to be sharply distinguished from the claim that RO is simply “correct”. Here it is worthwhile to quote Taylor at some length:

> Here again our understanding has been clouded by a naturalist epistemology and its focus on the natural science model. Because following the argument in favor of a theory in natural science requires that we neutralize our own anthropocentric reactions, we too easily conclude that arguments in the domain of practical reason ought not to rely on our spontaneous moral reactions. We ought to be able to convince people who share absolutely none of our basic moral intuitions of the justice of our cause, or else practical reason is of no avail. Certain modern doctrines have tried to take up this challenge, but we perhaps don’t need to examine their inadequacies in detail to see that the challenge cannot be met. The error is in thinking that it ought to be…Practical reasoning…is a reasoning in transitions. *It aims to establish, not that some position is correct absolutely, but rather than some position is superior to some other.*  

Unlike, say, the early Rawls, or any other doctrine that asserts we must leave behind our existent passions and feelings in order to engage in political philosophy, Taylor suggests instead that that is impossible. The aim of the BA principle is not to pursue truth with a neutral reason supposedly shorn of partisan feeling; rather, it is simply a matter of showing whether some philosophy A might do better than philosophy B in explaining some phenomena of interest.

In the case of my project, I aim to show that RO does better than radical democracy to ground the ideals on which we must rely in pursuing a more just society, especially a socialist society. Of greatest importance: while I contend in the dissertation that radical democracy in the end justifies not socialism but capitalism—that it, in fact, mirrors today’s capitalism in extremely important ways—RO is able to reassert the value of equality, fraternity, liberty, socialism, and above all the Good itself. It might seem strange to introduce capitalism here, but, along with the

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11 It is in this sense that I agree with Budgen, Kouvelakis, and Žižek when they claim that “the *universal* truth in a concrete situation can only be articulated from a thoroughly *partisan* position.” I would only add that it is always so. Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Slavoj Žižek, “Introduction: Repeating Lenin,” in *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth*, ed. Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 3.
RO theologians, I argue that capitalism itself is nihilistic, that the dynamics of capitalist society at the very least encourage the development of nihilism. I do not mean this last claim to be extraordinarily controversial. Rather, it is simply a variation on an old idea, namely that capitalism is extra-moral – capitalism is based on the circulation of commodities and the accumulation of capital. In this relentless process, visions of the good society are of course regularly superseded by the laws of buying and selling, by the relentless pursuit of profit, by the need to grow, sustain, and protect private property, and so forth.

Taking insights from both Milbank and Taylor, the logical structure of my dissertation is conditional: if we desire a coherent, radical, anti-capitalist philosophy, then we would do well to turn to RO, at least over against radical democracy. In conversation, some friends have pointed out to me that I also seem to be pursuing a *reductio ad absurdum* style argument. It looks roughly like this. Radical democracy is a worthwhile and understandable endeavor in the wake of the collapse of Communism. Yet the radical democrats I discuss undermine their own projects. Laclau and Mouffe claim to desire socialism, but I seek to show that their theory seems in fact to justify liberal-democratic capitalism, especially as that system presents itself to us in the early 21st century. Connolly claims to oppose secularism, but his theory is simply a new kind of secularism, more consistent with supposedly postmodern insights about the need for endless contestation and so forth. Zerilli claims to offer a new theory of judgment, but her theory ends up undercutting the possibility of reasoned judgment. The common thread is this: in each case we have apparently dissident theorists opposing some aspect of the status quo, but in each case, today’s status quo is in fact upheld. If this is so, as I claim, then we must pursue a theory that actually challenges the status quo, at least if we agree that that status quo (call it neoliberal capitalism, late capitalism, or liberal-democratic capitalism) is unjust.
Hopefully the basic idea of the project is by now clear. Now I want to turn to explore some implications of this project and why I think it is worthwhile.

First, I would like at least to nod toward another set of thinkers which I might instead have placed in dialogue with the radical democrats. These are the contemporary “communist” thinkers: Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Jodi Dean, Susan Buck-Morss, Bruno Bosteels, and others. These thinkers tend to be more favorable toward Marxism, to be more insistent on the need to abolish capitalism, to be far more skeptical of individualism and identity politics, to be much warmer toward the idea of the party, than the radical democrats. While I am generally fond of these communists, I chose not to focus on them in my dissertation for a few reasons, which I will briefly explain.12

First, when I began the project, only a few years ago, I thought that Marxism really couldn’t again assume the political importance it once had. I’m not sure I fully accept this thesis anymore, but it still strikes me as improbable that Marxism might once again constitute a real threat to liberal democratic capitalism.

Second, and far more importantly, my thinking drifted away from Marxism and toward radical currents in Christianity. The communist thinkers above often display varying levels of hostility toward Christianity. Badiou expresses as much very early on in his book on St. Paul: “For me, truth be told, Paul is not an apostle or a saint. I care nothing for the Good News he declares, or the cult dedicated to him.”13 Žižek, for his part, is interested in Christianity only insofar as it seems to him to hold out promise of a new, reinvigorated, thoroughgoing materialism: he is fond

12 I want to take some time to explain this choice simply because, among radical theorists, communists occupy an important place.

of noting the “atheist” core of Christianity, namely that it is the only religion where God himself dies—on a cross, as it happens.

The reason this dismissal of Christianity matters is because I am skeptical whether the communists might be able normatively to justify communism. In other words, I’m skeptical whether they can defend communism or socialism as normatively better than capitalism. For orthodox Marxists, historical laws may be discerned that provide insights into which ends we must elect. The end of such thinking deprived Marxism of its evaluative criteria for judgment. Today I would submit that there is no coherent framework to which the communists might appeal in order to show the good of communism. Unsurprisingly, I adopt this line of thinking too from Milbank: “one issue here is that possibly in the Marxist critique of capitalism it tended to be seen as manifestly irrational, in other words as conflicting with the mass of basic human needs. And there is a certain sense in which that may be true, but it ignores the question of what ends you actually elect, and that concerns questions about what ends you decide are desirable and worthy to pursue.”14 Of course, communists have still attempted to make the case that capitalism is bad and socialism is good, but I believe these accounts leave something to be desired. For now, I’ll look briefly at two familiar criticisms of capitalism from the communists and suggest that they are ultimately—and very importantly—misguided.

First, consider the familiar criticism that, while capitalism has allowed some measure of the liberation of the individual, socialism is necessary to attain fuller liberation of the individual. Such a criticism might fairly be associated with someone like Herbert Marcuse, but closer to the present we see something like this sentiment in Badiou when he celebrates the desacralizing

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tendencies of capital—the logic in this celebration is that philosophy must continue what capitalism has begun. This logic is the same as that found in Marx, and I believe it’s also similar Deleuze’s fondness for “deterritorialization.” It finds resonance too in the 1960s Left, which sought above all to liberate the individual from structures of power, to allow for individual expression and difference. We see another version of this in the identity politics Left of today, with its fixation on extending respect and gratitude to all manner of individual identities—indeed, it is formally accepted by many of our basic institutions today that all individuals should be free to identity however that individual prefers. Our own University of Colorado routinely funds and hosts seminars devoted to just this kind of practice, often for the LGBTQ+ community, and especially to raise awareness of trans issues. Some of these endeavors may well be laudable, but I believe the expansion of individual liberties and rights to self-expression—the right to be different, as some like to say—represents nothing more than the normal functioning of capitalism today. One might show this in a number of ways. First and foremost, the language of individual expression, of the creation and maintenance of a uniquely individual identity, is not only a wonderful source of ever new needs and markets, it is also advanced by powerful capitalist interests, as seen in the recent debates over the Indiana Religious Freedom Restoration Act or the North Carolina House Bill 2. In both cases, the content and meaning of the laws themselves are less interesting to me than the fact that powerful capitalists overwhelmingly opposed the measures. Second, more abstractly, Bruno Bosteels points out that “there can be no doubt that the ontological themes of difference, multiplicity, event, becoming, and so on are the product of late capitalism as much as, if not more

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than, they are counteracting forces.”\textsuperscript{16} The right of greater and greater individual self-expression, the rise of the politics of difference, and the withering of traditions that prescribe a vision of the good to which individuals ought to conform—all of these are lauded by many today, but all of them represent a politics that is ultimately capitalist. Thus, I contend that we cannot look to this in order to advance a critique of capitalism today.

A second criticism of capitalism which is today routine is the idea that capitalism doesn’t “work.” We find a version of this from Dean: “The illusion that capitalism works has been shattered by all manner of economic and financial disaster—and we see it everywhere.”\textsuperscript{17} However, as Daniel Bell Jr. points out, “it is rather obvious that capitalism works…No economic order to date has so obviously displayed such an enormous productive capacity as has capitalism.” In other words, my claim here is simply that there are good reasons, as articulated by Bell Jr., for objecting to Dean’s argument that capitalism does not work. For Bell, “[i]nstead of asking, Does capitalism work? we ought to ask, What work does it do?”\textsuperscript{18} For Bell, it is ineffective to criticize capitalism for failing to work, if by “work” we mean providing work, housing, and necessities like food and water to all people. That is not the work that capitalism does. Likewise, to criticize capitalism for failing to avoid periodic crises is folly of the same kind. The work of capitalism, instead, has to do with the dominance of capital (understood in Marx’s sense as apparently self-expanding value) and the creation of a society devoted to the end of increasing profits for capitalists. Understood in this sense, capitalism works quite well, and when the dominance of capital is threatened, then the state will come to the rescue. Instead, Bell will argue, we ought to

\begin{footnotes}
\item[16] Bruno Bosteels, “Afterword: Thinking, Being, Acting; Or, On the Uses and Disadvantages of Ontology for Politics,” in \textit{A Leftist Ontology: Beyond Relativism and Identity Politics}, ed. Carsten Strathausen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 244.
\item[18] Daniel M. Bell Jr., \textit{The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World} (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 84.
\end{footnotes}
focus on how capitalism warps desire in ways that are in fact objectively undesirable. This would entail, of course, a normative argument, precisely the kind of argument the communists are often loathe to make (Dean herself is a wonderful example).

I want to suggest, with Milbank, that the confusion evinced above in communists’ arguments against capitalism is not random or unexpected but symptomatic of a philosophy that can no longer coherently criticize capitalism, because it cannot coherently defend the ideals necessary for such a critique. Where I think the communists fall short on this count, I think RO holds out some promise of succeeding. As I see it, the failure of communism here has to do with the failure to confront nihilism as a problem.

Confronting nihilism as a problem is one of the central tasks of my dissertation, so I want to spend a little time here discussing what I mean by nihilism and why I think it is both a philosophical and political problem.

What is nihilism? Strauss defines it this way: “a state of indifference to any goal, or of aimlessness and drifting.” For him, such a state is induced by the intellectual dominance of natural science, on the one hand, and historicism on the other. Natural science reveals our deeply held values to be akin to preferences and nothing more, and therefore serious study of which preferences to prefer is futile. This view is routinely held by social scientists today. Historicism, meanwhile, reveals that supposedly timeless ideals, norms, and values are in fact relative to particular times and places. What is left is the belief that underlying moral and political perspectives is, ultimately, nothing—nothing more than blind preference or the contingency of time and place. Arendt, admittedly in a very different manner, reaches a similar diagnosis when she comments that the “traditional concepts…of political language” have today become nothing

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more than “empty shells with which to settle almost all accounts, regardless of their underlying
phenomenal reality.” For both Strauss and Arendt, a kind of order in political discourse has, for
some reason, been lost, and the result is that we struggle today to bring reason to bear upon moral
and political problems. Following both Strauss and Arendt, by nihilism I mean the proposition that
there is nothing to our values or ideals, and that we therefore cannot bring reason to bear upon
them.

Why should we concern ourselves with this supposed problem? I want to raise two broad
reasons I think we should.

First, nihilism threatens to render normative political theory itself utterly incoherent. Nihilism
simply does not allow us to argue reasonably that one vision of society—say, socialism—is more
just than another—say, capitalism. It undermines one of the traditional tasks of political
philosophy, which is to pronounce on the good society, to aim for the good society, to conceive of
the good society. If nihilism holds, than perhaps political philosophy can survive in universities as
a kind of intellectual mall—a demonstration to students of all the different political philosophies
to which they might subscribe. But it means that political philosophy as the search for the good
society, and as a defense of those goods our society has achieved, is surely finished. Strauss seems
to paint a picture of complacency developing from nihilism. The logic of this argument seems
reasonable enough: if there are no good reasons to believe in some vision of justice or the good
society, and if people act on good reasons, then people won’t act. They will remain complacent –
thus, nihilism favors the status quo, whatever it may be. Nihilism might have some influence like
that today, but it seems truer to me to suggest that nihilism might also result in a hyper-
individualism: while values are of course empty of content, and while one cannot reasonably

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evaluate any values, one shall nevertheless subscribe to some values, especially as they concern oneself, one’s individuality. Put more simply, if higher values are devoid of content, selfishness becomes more reasonable and likely. I think the following conditional is incontrovertibly true: if nihilism holds, then it follows that reason is powerless to demonstrate the superiority of one political philosophy over another.

Second, politically, we should concern ourselves with nihilism because, as Milbank puts it, “there is something nihilistic…about capitalism.”21 As Marx described so well, the logic of capitalism is to melt everything solid into air—to ruthlessly destroy everything sacred, permanent, or lasting. Therefore I contend that nihilism is inimical to socialism, and that if we desire the latter, we should attempt to find a way around the former. Nihilism then, ought to be of general interest to those interested in the truth about the good society and of particular interest to socialists.

**Thoughts on the Meaning of Political Philosophy**

I would like to say a few words about my basic perspective toward the practice of “political philosophy.” It seems to me true that any work in political philosophy necessarily takes a stand on the meaning of political philosophy, even if that stand is only taken implicitly. Because I am writing a dissertation – because this endeavor is largely taken for myself, and I have no audience of which to speak beyond my committee members – I might as well explicitly take a stand on the matter. Furthermore, I hope that by explaining my views on political philosophy, my project might become a little clearer still. I will open this discussion by considering the state of some recent

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Leftist theory, and I will then describe my own view, which is based to a large extent on the work of Leo Strauss.

These days no one is content with the study of political theory. They all want to go further – into politics itself. Today academic dissertations, essays, books, and lectures frequently promise somehow to “contribute” to existent political struggle, to the benefit of the oppressed, of course. Consider, for instance, the stated aims of the editors of a recent collection of essays on anarchism: “The purpose of this volume, the purpose of what we are designating as critical anarchism, is to bring recognition and awareness to these myriad anarchist practices, to help make the constellation of resistances more clear to itself as such.” While this might appear fairly standard, even boilerplate, I want to suggest this is a remarkable statement. First, it is remarkable what the editors do not say: that anarchism is a more just order than the liberal democratic capitalist order. Perhaps this claim is implied, but the editors do not say it outright, thereby freeing themselves from the arduous task of speaking coherently about things like “justice”. Instead of such a straightforwardly normative argument, the editors seek to shine a light on present anarchist practices. However, the role of theory here is not limited to the basic phenomenological task of describing a part of the political world. It extends to making a “constellation of resistances more clear to itself as such.” The meaning of this claim is not transparent, but it seems to entail that political theory, in this case, serves as something like the handmaiden of resistance(s). The role of theory, in other words, is to aid some practice – to contribute to the practice itself in some meager way.

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This is an interesting conception of theory for several reasons. First, it is a novel conception – it is doubtful that even someone like Karl Marx so conceived of his work, as merely a handmaiden to political practice. Second, it is entirely unclear whether theory so conceived is remotely successful in its aims. Do anarchists read each new collection of essays on anarchist theory? Do young socialists busy themselves with the latest Duke University Press book on post/Marxist/anarchist/radical/democratic theory? Does the political Left consume the latest academic publications in order better to understand itself? My hunch is to answer all of these questions negatively. Even if we must remain agnostic regarding these questions, it is nevertheless remarkable that the apparent raison d’être is perhaps something of a sham. Third, even if much of the “resistances” in fact consume academic publications with regularity, it is unclear whether this sufficiently grounds the lofty status of academic political theory. Presumably there must be some reason why certain studies merit a place in the universities while other studies do not. For instance, most would agree that the study of chemistry merits inclusion in any good university, while most would disagree that the study of which sorts of tacos are most delicious merits inclusion. However, the reason for this demarcation is not self-evident. Considering the case of “radical” political theory might make this claim somewhat clearer. Returning to consider the collection of essays on anarchism cited above, we might consider why this collection and these scholars merit their place in American universities. The aim of this collection is to aid anarchist practice – and perhaps other related instances of resistances as well. Would a similar collection of essays by far-right scholars seeking to contribute to fascist and Nazi practices – and resistances – merit similar inclusion in the universities? If not, why not? This question must be answered lest much contemporary scholarly activity, in political theory and elsewhere, prove incoherent and senseless (or does this matter?).
Now I turn to my own view of political philosophy, which I will communicate primarily through a discussion of Strauss.

Strauss distinguishes between “political philosophy” and “political thought”: while all political philosophy is political thought, not all political thought is political philosophy. Political thought is any thinking about political things, but political philosophy is something more specialized. Strauss suggests, sensibly enough, that political philosophy forms part of a larger whole called philosophy, and philosophy “is essentially not possession of the truth, but quest for the truth.”

Political philosophy, then, is “the attempt to replace opinion about the nature of political things by knowledge of the nature of political things.” It is worth quoting Strauss at some length at this point in order better to understand what he is trying to say:

Political things are by their nature subject to approval and disapproval, to choice and rejection, to praise and blame. It is of their essence not to be neutral but to raise a claim to men’s obedience, allegiance, decision or judgment. One does not understand them as what they are, as political things, if one does not take seriously their explicit or implicit claim to be judged in terms of goodness or badness, of justice or injustice, i.e., if one does not measure them by some standard of goodness or justice. To judge soundly one must know the true standards. If political philosophy wishes to do justice to its subject matter, it must strive for genuine knowledge of these standards. Political philosophy is the attempt truly to know both the nature of political things and the right, or the good, political order.

I find this to be an immensely clarifying paragraph. For Strauss, it is impossible in politics not to make claims to truth regarding the normatively better and the worse, a view shared by Ronald Beiner. Political philosophy, Strauss reasons, is this same practice to some higher degree of complexity, of thoroughness – a higher use of human reason, one might say. Thus, political philosophy is a complex quest after the truth about the good society, and, typically, political

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25 Ibid., 11–12.
26 Ibid., 12.
philosophers argue about aspects of the good society. Put another way, what this means is that political philosophy always involves, at least in part, arguments (not “disputes” in Kant’s terms)\textsuperscript{28} that are normative in character – that is, they have to do with questions of what ought to be and not only what is. We seek the truth of what ought to be, even if we can never obtain it conclusively or once and for all.

If political philosophy specifically seeks the truth about the good society, political thought is far more general. According to Strauss, “[b]y political thought we understand the reflection on, or the exposition of, political ideas…Political thought is, as such, indifferent to the distinction between opinion and knowledge.”\textsuperscript{29} Intuitively, I find this kind of distinction to be sensible, especially in our own day when professional political philosophers seem to be tasked again and again with justifying their position in the universities. Of course if we cannot lay any special claim about the relation of our studies to truth, it appears—to me at least—difficult indeed to justify the inclusion of political philosophy or political theory in the university.\textsuperscript{30} Lately it is fashionable to defend not only political philosophy specifically but also the humanities more generally by positing that such study assists students in developing “critical thinking.” Such a defense feels to me somewhat \textit{ad hoc}, and even supposing a coherent conception of the meaning of “critical


\textsuperscript{29} Strauss, “What Is Political Philosophy?” 12.

\textsuperscript{30} I don’t mean to change the subject through some sort of sleight of hand with the introduction of the concept of “political theory.” Rather I do not follow Strauss in finely distinguishing “political philosophy” from “political theory,” if only because political theory today seems to have taken on meanings other than what Strauss mentions. Therefore henceforth I shall use “political philosophy” and “political theory” interchangeably. However, this interchangeability reflects for me the conclusion of an argument, namely that our practice in the university ought to comport itself to truth, ought to aim at truth. Obviously I do not follow Hannah Arendt’s usage of the term “political theory” either. For her views, see the discussion in Steve Buckler’s \textit{Hannah Arendt and Political Theory: Challenging the Tradition} (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), chap. 8.
thinking,” it is not clear to me that that pursuit justifies the status of the disciplines in question—
their esteem, the numbers of scholars, and so forth.

Of course other scholars have advanced other views of the meaning and purpose of political
philosophy or political theory. Isaiah Berlin famously compares studying political theory to putting
idea is at least part of the task of educating undergraduates: if one is a liberal, one might see the
world like so, and if one is a fascist, one might see the world contrarily like so, etc. Yet more
interesting for my purposes is James Tully’s more recent essay on the meaning of political
philosophy.\footnote{James Tully, “Political Philosophy as Critical Activity,” \textit{Political Theory} 30, no. 4 (August 2002): 533–55.} Tully says that the “aim” of his vision of political philosophy as critical activity “is
to disclose the conditions of possibility of a historically singular set of problematic practices of
governance in the present.”\footnote{Ibid., 142.} Tully’s jargon here alerts the reader to the essentially Foucauldian
nature of his conception of political philosophy. Tully seems more or less to desire political
philosophy to be genealogy. Foucault’s comments on the task of the genealogist bear affinity to
Tully’s view of political philosophy: “He must be able to recognize events of history, its jolts, its
his great projects in terms even more similar to Tully’s: “what I am attempting to bring to light,”
says Foucault in the preface to \textit{The Order of Things}, “is the epistemological field, the episteme in
which knowledge…grounds its positivity and thereby manifests a history which is not that of its
growing perfection, but rather that of its conditions of possibility.”\footnote{Michel Foucault, \textit{The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences} (New York: Random House, 1970), xxii. It should be noted that in that book Foucault describes his method as archaeology, not genealogy, a view he later revises.} As Foucault wishes to
disclose the conditions of possibility for knowledge of the human sciences, so Tully wishes to disclose the conditions of possibility for the “problematic” modes of governance in the present. Tully’s objective in pursuing this task is not merely historical. He also clearly describes his objective in normative terms, for instance when he speaks of the need “to develop a political philosophy that has the capacity to bring to light the specific forms of oppression today.”36 Thus Tully seeks to disclose the conditions of possibility for problematic modes of governance precisely in order that such problematic modes may be done away with and replaced—or at the very least criticized and brought out of the shadows and into the light of day.

The problem with Tully’s view is that he is, strictly speaking, question-begging, in a manner which would have been familiar to Strauss. Tully asserts precisely that which must be argued, namely certain aspects of a vision of the good society. For Tully, “oppression,” whatever that might mean, is a bad, and therefore “oppression” ought to be avoided, eliminated, struggled against, and so forth—a view typical of many Leftist political philosophers, typical of all the Leftist thinkers discussed in this dissertation in fact. Tully’s vision of political philosophy ends at genealogy, but such a vision is radically insufficient for political philosophy, precisely because, as Strauss details, any political philosophy must implicitly or explicitly advance a vision of what ought to be. Yet Tully provides no grounds for determining what ought to be, relying instead upon what he hopes to be the glaringly obvious evil of “oppression” (again, whatever that might mean—contrary to what Tully seems to believe, the meaning is not transparent or obvious). For this reason I contend that Strauss’s view is superior to Tully’s view, because political philosophy is fated always to reckon with these questions of the better and the worse, and we would do well to

36 Tully, “Political Philosophy as Critical Activity,” 537.
see how we might think through such questions. As Strauss knows, it may well turn out that political philosophy is simply an impossible endeavor.37

I agree with Strauss that political philosophy aims at the truth about the good society, but I disagree with Strauss’s own approach to seeking such truth. Strauss distinguishes political philosophy from political theology. The latter is based on divine revelation, but for Strauss “[p]olitical philosophy is limited to what is accessible to the unassisted human mind.”38 However, according to Strauss the aim of political philosophy is today compromised by historicism on the one hand and modern science on the other, both of which deny that the question of the good society is a question which is subject to reasonable philosophical inquiry. Therefore Strauss contends that in order to rekindle political philosophy, we must return to classical political philosophy. The latter, he says, is more intimately related to everyday politics: “The primary questions of classical political philosophy, and the terms in which it stated them, were not specifically philosophic or scientific; they were questions that are raised in assemblies, councils, clubs and cabinets, and they were stated in terms ineligible and familiar…from everyday experience and everyday usage.”39 Because classical political philosophy is in this manner much more closely related to the “natural” questions that arise in everyday political discourse, Strauss believes that close study of classical political philosophy might help us avoid the modern problems of historicism and modern science, and such study might therefore help us to rethink political philosophy as such. It might help us, then, to avoid the pitfalls of nihilism and relativism which are the result of those modern problems. Thus much of Strauss’s work consists of close readings of classical political philosophers.

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37 See, e.g. Strauss, “What Is Political Philosophy?” 17. One might also consider the first two chapters of Strauss’s Natural Right and History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953). Strauss believes that historicism and positivism constitute two strong challenges to the practice of political philosophy.
This conceptualization of the task of political philosophy is indeed powerful, and it is unsurprising that Strauss’s work led to an entirely new “school” of political philosophy. Yet it hinges on the above distinction between political philosophy and political theology, or the distinction between “unassisted” human reason and divine revelation. This distinction itself reflects Strauss’s famous preoccupation with the so-called theologico-political problem. Steven B. Smith explains: “The great theme of Strauss’s life work…is the theologico-political problem…At the center of the theologico-political problem is a choice or conflict between two comprehensive and apparently irreconcilable alternatives: revelation and reason, or as he refers to them metaphorically, Jerusalem and Athens.”

Now as Smith points out, it is not accurate to claim without qualification that Strauss simply advocated one or the other, Jerusalem or Athens. Rather, Strauss’s “challenge was not to declare a winner in this struggle, but to remain open to the claims of each and the challenge of each.” This is well and good, but Strauss nevertheless seems sharply to demarcate Jerusalem and Athens. It is this sharp demarcation with which I take particular issue, especially through my reading of John Milbank. Milbank, as we shall see, seeks to deconstruct the apparently contradictory relationship between reason and faith, and show instead, in a manner reminiscent of Kierkegaard, that even human reason itself depends ultimately on a kind of leap of faith.

If Strauss is correct about the demarcation of reason and revelation, then it would also make sense, I argue, to speak of a demarcation of the secular and the religious. However, as will become clearer later on, Milbank gives us reasons to be suspicious of such a demarcation. Among Milbank’s central tasks in what is arguably his magnum opus, Theology and Social Theory, is to

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41 Ibid., 11.
demonstrate that there is always a religious element to supposedly secular social theory – there is always an element which must be accepted on nothing more than faith. I will explain this further below, of course, in particular in chapter two on secularism.

**Some Philosophical Background to the Dissertation**

I think that in the background of this dissertation stands a certain loosely aligned family of continental philosophy—a family among other discernible families—whose patriarchs are Nietzsche and Heidegger, and which includes Arendt, the later Wittgenstein, and the French theorists (e.g. Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard). In this dissertation I do not confront these theorists head on, but instead I examine some of their modern interpreters, e.g. Connolly, Zerilli, Laclau, and Mouffe. Such thinkers emphasize concepts such as hollow idols, finitude, the limited nature of experience, the shaping power of crucial aspects of that experience such as language, the ontological priority of the flux, the contingency of that which appears utterly natural, and the unmasking of truth as power.

Now, Connolly, and Zerilli fairly obviously fit into this family, but it might be objected that Laclau and Mouffe cite the family fairly heavily but cite Marxists (e.g. Lenin, Luxemburg, Kautsky, Gramsci) even more heavily.

Against this thesis I would raise two objections which will require me briefly to offer a digression in which I discuss issues within Marxist theory and practice in the 20th century.

First, Laclau and Mouffe disagree quite strongly with and argue against the Marxists of the Second International (viz. Lenin, Luxemburg, Kautsky, Trotsky), and indeed with so-called orthodox Marxism as a whole, as I shall note in chapter four.
Second, it is not obvious to me that Gramsci ought to be read as an orthodox Marxist but instead as an opponent of orthodox Marxism, putting forth the idea of the hegemonic bloc to explain why the masses had not successfully rebelled in the countries in which Marx predicted they would—and instead extreme, violent forms of nationalism eventually engulfed Europe in one world war Gramsci witnessed and another he did not. This same question—why has the proletariat failed to revolt against the bourgeoisie—is taken up by such thinkers as Adorno, Althusser, Foucault, Deleuze, and, today, Žižek. In assessing this problem, these thinkers diverge somewhat in the extent to which they agree with Marx’s critique of capitalism and his theory of revolution. If Gramsci deviated somewhat from orthodox Marxism which had always accorded prime importance to economic conditions and class struggle, then Laclau and Mouffe deviate even further. I contend that Laclau and Mouffe are actually closer to the family of thinkers described above than they are to Marxism. Once again, I return to this argument in chapter four.

(Nevertheless, I believe it is important to remember that all of these thinkers believe that the present political order is in some way unjust, and that, if not the proletariat, then at least some group of the oppressed and marginalized ought somehow to rise up against their masters, even if it is the case, as I earlier suggested, that for these thinkers it is unclear why they ought to rise up.)

Now, all of this is to say precisely that Gramsci (and also Laclau and Mouffe) belongs to a long line of thinkers and philosophers who are testimony to and inheritors of a tremendous failure of socialist politics—a failure in which the years 1914 and 1917 are crucial. In 1914 the importance of the class struggle gave way to the importance of the national struggle, and the First World War erupted. This event shattered the existent socialist movement in Europe, and the manner in which many revered socialist leaders came to advocate nationalist militarism proved shocking to those socialists who remained internationalists. The historian Orlando Figes provides a hint of the depth
of this shock. He tells of the reaction of some of the future leaders of the Russian Revolution to the news that the German Social Democrats, whose intellectual figurehead was Kautsky, supported the Kaiser’s war:

The Social Democrats rallied behind the Kaiser in support of the war campaign. For the leaders of the Russian Revolution, who thought of themselves as disciples of the European Marxist tradition, the ‘betrayal of the Germans’ was, as Bukharin put it, ‘the greatest tragedy of our lives’. Lenin, then in Switzerland, had been so convinced of the German comrades’ commitment to the international cause that he had at first dismissed the press reports of their support for the war as part of a German plot to deceive the socialists abroad. Trotsky, who had heard the news on his way to Zurich, was shocked by it ‘even more than the declaration of war’. As for [Alexandra] Kollontai, she had been present in the Reichstag to witness her heroes give their approval to the German military budget. She had watched in disbelief as they lined up one by one, some of them even dressed in army uniforms, to declare their allegiance to the Fatherland. ‘I could not believe it,’ she wrote in her diary that evening; ‘I was convinced that either they had all gone mad, or else I had lost my mind.’ After the fatal vote had been taken she had run out in distress into the lobby – only to be accosted by one of the socialist deputies who angrily asked her what Russian was doing inside the Reichstag building. It had suddenly dawned upon her that the old solidarity of the International had been buried, that the socialist cause had been lost in chauvinism, and ‘it seemed to me’, she wrote in her diary, ‘that all was now lost’.42

Apologies to my readers for the lengthy block quotation, but it describes very well the disastrous collapse of the international socialist movement at the beginning of the last century.

The other year I mentioned above, 1917, is of course the year of the October Revolution, whose centenary will be marked this coming November. The October Revolution is what is usually meant when people speak today of the Russian Revolution, but according to Lenin, the Russian Revolution was to be but the first eruption of a European-wide socialist revolution. Already in August 1917 he refers to revolution in Russia as “a link in a chain of socialist proletarian revolutions” which would sweep across Europe.43 Upon the victory of the Bolsheviks on October 25, 1917, the revolution spread to other parts of Europe, triggering a wave of socialist revolutions that would change the course of history.

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25th 1917 (November 7th in the Gregorian calendar subsequently adopted by the Bolshevik government), Lenin is similarly clear that socialist victory requires revolution in the West: “The [Petrograd] Soviet is convinced that the proletariat of the West European countries will help us to achieve a complete and lasting victory for the cause of socialism.” Even nearly three years later, in mid-1920, after the spectacular failure of the Spartacist uprising in Germany of January 1919 (in the aftermath of which Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were murdered), Lenin remains steadfastly internationalist, expecting revolution in the West: “soon after the victory of the proletarian revolution in at least one of the advanced countries, a sharp change will come about: Russia will cease to be the model and will once again become a backward country.” Lenin and other Russian revolutionaries expected aid which would never come, and, left to itself, Communist Russia eventually atrophied into the Stalinist nightmare.

So much for the brief digression. As I have suggested, most 20th century socialist and radical thought might be read as a response to this singular socialist failure, and so too might my dissertation be read as a response to failure: the failure I discussed above to be sure, but also the failure of the Left to rekindle socialist politics after the fall of Communism in 1989. Many Western Leftists saw in the latter a kind of freedom from a bondage, namely the bondage of the legacy of Stalinism. Finally the Left could forge ahead with a new vision, no longer occupied, as were earlier socialists such as Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, with the relation of socialist thought to the terror of the Soviet Union and other Communist states. Laclau and Mouffe express this new hope, declaring their intention “to outline a new politics for the Left based upon the project of a radical

45 Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, “‘Left Wing’ Communism - An Infantile Disorder,” in The Lenin Anthology, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1975), 551. Perhaps I am mistaken, but it seems to me that in this passage one may even note a kind of despair in Lenin’s words - the “world revolution” he had expected appeared less and less likely to come to pass.
46 Of course, this should not be read as a directly causal claim. The history is rather more complicated.
They wrote this in 1985, but over thirty years later, it is difficult in my view to speak of the fruits of “radical democracy” – a term which has almost no currency today outside academic conferences.

Today, as the cliché goes, Leftist politics stand at an impasse. Socialist movements remain basically insignificant while populist right-wing movements surge both in the US and across Europe. As Jodi Dean argues, today the Left has all but given up on the “old Left” idea of socialist politics, embracing instead a curious mixture of identity politics, the yearning for authenticity, the carnivalesque, and “the politics of the beautiful moment.” Concurring with Dean, I think that through embracing such forms, the Left has also embraced its own insignificance. Therefore the political task today, for the Left, is to consider how we might rejuvenate socialist politics.

This basic conviction of Leftist failure and the need for rejuvenated socialist politics inspires this dissertation. Yet what role might philosophy play? Pace Dean, I do not think arguments should be accepted or rejected according to whether they are politically satisfactory or not, because such a bizarre mode of political theory begs the question: the point, after all, is to demonstrate why something might be politically satisfactory and what that might mean.

Instead in this work I follow Milbank’s own conceptualization of his project: “Theology and Social Theory was written in the middle of the Thatcherite era, out of the conviction that a theological vision alone could challenge the emerging hegemony of neo-liberalism.” While I do not agree with Milbank’s exclusionary view—I do not have the confidence to assert that a theological vision alone will do the job—I put forward the Radically Orthodox Christian vision as

49 See ibid., 57 Here Dean rejects an argument because she claims it is “politically unsatisfying.”
50 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, xi.
a better account than those of secular socialisms. A major reason for this, as I noted above, is that Radical Orthodoxy eludes the nihilism which plagues so much Leftist theory today. However, I think it also allows us once again to posit a vision of socialism infused with virtue, as I note in chapter four. Too often the element of virtue is elided in contemporary Leftist theory, and the only evident normative aim becomes, as Milbank writes of Marx, “the unleashing of human freedom.” Yet freedom cannot be its own end, divorced from virtue, because in that case, as Milbank says, “[f]reedom becomes freedom without a point, freedom for futility.” I would add to this that in fact if part of the aim of socialism is to abolish capitalism, then seeking freedom for its own sake is inimical to this aim, because capitalism is indeed, in one sense, an extreme unleashing of negative freedom at least. This Marx understood well when he spoke of the revolutionary, dynamic, even emancipatory character of capitalism in the Manifesto.

Therefore with Milbank I affirm the need to justify an “alternative mythos” to capitalism, an alternative story to the common liberal capitalist story of tearing down boundaries and transgressing traditions and so forth. For Milbank, and ultimately for me too, the dominant mythos of our time is nihilism, which sees behind every apparent something a true nothing, which sees the void and the unending flux as fundamental.

Finally, I want to say just a brief word about the politics of the project. Milbank is often asked in interviews whether he is proposing a theocracy. Of course, his usual response is to point out that a theocracy is in fact a modern notion, predicated upon the formal separation of the world and divinity, in which divine law is brought to bear upon the worldly. Such a political philosophy

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51 Ibid., 177.
is an impossibility from a Christian perspective that emphasizes unending participation in God—not to mention St. Paul’s radical condemnations of an emphasis on religious law.

For my part, I want to hone in on one last quotation from Milbank that I think nicely captures the political vision of my project:

In the face of globalization and the new American empire, we need to counterpose Augustine’s counter-empire, the City of God. We may do this alongside many secular co-workers: socialists, communists and anarchists. We should not refuse their co-operation, yet we should insist that they have little grasp of the counter-empire, since for them it is still a matter of simply unleashing more undifferentiated liberty, going yet further beyond the Law. For us, rather, it should seem that the impossibility of pure flux and unmediated difference will inevitably bring with it an arbitrary and oppressive deterritorialization.53

In terms perhaps more practical, it would be sheer madness simply to refuse political solidarity with these “secular co-workers.” The gravity of the decline of the Left in America may be measured today by a singular political failure: the failure to elect even a well-meaning social democrat like Bernie Sanders. If even that is impossible in today’s political climate, then a politics capable of fundamentally challenging capitalism is yet more impossible. As I have attempted to note, I consider this work to be a work of political philosophy, which is not the same thing as politics itself. Yet if there is any political vision that this project recommends, then it is a broad-based socialist movement, one in which secularism is not taken for granted, in which Christianity and other traditions are not automatically condemned, in which we are able to free ourselves from these and other legacies of Leftist politics and turn our attention instead to the crucial work of advancing an alternative to capitalism.

**Preview of Substantive Chapters**

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Four substantive chapters follow.

In chapter one, on ontology, I contrast the ontology of immanentism, characterized by an emphasis on flux and a priority accorded to violence, and embraced, I demonstrate, by many radical thinkers today, with RO’s ontology of participation in divinity and the priority of peace. I suggest the RO’s ontology might be preferable for two reasons. First, unlike immanentism, RO’s ontology is able to elude the conclusion of nihilism. Second, I contend that immanentism mirrors in ontology the social reality of neoliberal capitalism, despite the fact that the Leftist theorists advancing immanentism oppose neoliberal capitalism. Meanwhile, I argue with Milbank that RO constitutes an alternative story that might hold out some promise of constituting an alternative to neoliberal capitalism.

In chapter two, I examine the issue of secularism by staging a conversation between William Connolly and Milbank. I think such a conversation is especially fruitful because neither Connolly nor Milbank uphold an ideal of secularism as somehow the embodiment of neutral reason – in this sense, both Connolly and Milbank ostensibly oppose what Charles Taylor calls the subtraction thesis, or the thesis that secularism can be understood as reason or rationality which has sloughed off, or subtracted, faith-based views. Furthermore both Connolly and Milbank seek somehow to oppose secularism understood as such an embodiment of neutral reason, and therefore I think the conversation holds out promise of proving very interesting. Nevertheless I argue that only Milbank’s clearly theological view is able ultimately to oppose secularism. I conclude the chapter with a consideration of St. Paul as a guide for thinking about a post-secular politics.

In chapter three, I consider Linda Zerilli’s fascinating theory of judgment as it has evolved in her work over the last decade or so, and I contrast it with the Radically Orthodox account of judgment provided by Daniel M. Bell Jr. Zerilli’s theory of judgment is noteworthy because while
she is plainly concerned with what we might call the crisis of judgment, namely, the lack of shared standards with which to make evaluative political judgments (of good and bad, better and worse, and so forth) and the resulting prevalence of radical subjectivism, she does not propose an account whereby political judgments may be remotely settled philosophically. Interestingly she suggests that only politics, not philosophy, can remedy this state of affairs. I argue that while Zerilli’s account certainly merits attention, she reduces judgment to power and ultimately cannot stave off the conclusion of nihilism, which means that there simply are no better or worse political judgments – such evaluation is always a fantasy. The central conclusion of this chapter, crucial for the dissertation as a whole, is that RO might hold promise of a non-nihilistic account of judgment – and because political philosophy is nothing more than the art of making one kind of judgments (namely political judgments, or judgments about political things), this means also that RO holds out hope of preserving the coherence of political philosophy as such. For if political philosophy is incoherent, in the sense that it is extra-reasonable, then it follows that the political philosophy of socialism, which I defend throughout, is likewise incoherent.

In chapter four, I consider at more length the impasse the Left has found itself in since 1989. Clearly, the road of dogmatic Marxism-Leninism is littered with such treachery that to attempt once more to traverse it is nothing short of madness. Yet where does that leave us? In this chapter, I will consider the role that RO might play in rejuvenating the contemporary critique of capitalism and the search for alternatives. As in previous chapters, I will put John Milbank in conversation with radical democrats, this time Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. I believe such a conversation to be worthwhile because while all three are interested in a politics beyond capitalism, the contrasts between Milbank’s Radical Orthodoxy and Laclau and Mouffe’s radical democratic politics are sharp and therefore instructive and illuminating. I will contend that Radical
Orthodoxy succeeds over against radical democratic politics because while the latter ends up celebrating the groundless flux of neoliberal capitalism, RO sees politics (and indeed all of human life) as participating in God and therefore as eminently liturgical. I believe this conception of the sacrality of the immanent, of the participation of the divine in the world, might successfully resist the insidious logic of capture which characterizes modern capitalism and, therefore, help ground a new vision of socialism.

Finally in my brief conclusion I consider first some drawbacks of Milbank’s theology, focusing especially on what I consider to be his hubris. Second, I briefly reflect on the future of anti-capitalism after the tumultuous political year of 2016, with an eye on the growing populist movements witnessed across the world today, from the US to Western Europe to Russia to the Philippines. Even in this situation, which can only with the greatest exaggeration be described as remotely theological or religious, I want to suggest the RO and Milbank in particular might help us to understand what is taking place, if we conceptualize populism itself, as it manifests itself, as a kind of counter-mythos to liberal-democratic-capitalism, a story which appeals to many who for various reasons oppose the latter.

While the chapters stand in what I think is a fairly clear relation – namely that each puts radical democratic theory in conversation with Radical Orthodoxy – it is perhaps true that each chapter remains somewhat self-contained, and that the unity of the dissertation is not immediately evident. Perhaps like Arendt’s Between Past and Future the chapters contained herein constitute “exercises” in thinking along a theme – perhaps, like her great book, the chapters of this dissertation constitute “not the unity of a whole but of a sequence of movements which, as in a musical suite, are written in the same or related keys.” For my part, I think of the different

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54 Arendt, Between Past and Future, 1968, 15.
chapters as variations on a theme, the theme being an examination of radical democratic theory and Radical Orthodoxy. If the arguments of my dissertation make some kind of sense to my readers, if it is in the end clear why I would attempt such an endeavor, then perhaps that is the best I can hope for.
CHAPTER II

ONTOMETRY

The ruling [herrschenden] ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant [herrschenden] material relationships, the dominant [herrschenden] material relationships grasped as ideas. – Marx⁵⁵

If a human being did not have an eternal consciousness, if underlying everything there were only a wild, fermenting power that writhing in dark passions produced everything, be it significant or insignificant, if a vast, never appeased emptiness hid beneath everything, what would life be then but despair? – Kierkegaard⁶⁶

Introduction

My primary goal in this chapter is to discuss two rival ontologies and to provide some reasons for favoring one over the other. The two ontologies in question are, first, what I call an immanentist ontology that I claim is fairly ubiquitously advanced in radically democratic circles and, second, the Christian ontology of participation and peace of Radical Orthodoxy (RO). I note four chief characteristics of immanentism, which I shall explain in turn: immanence, postfoundationalism, the primacy of violence, and an emphasis on arbitrariness and flux. Likewise,

I note four chief characteristics of the ontology of RO: transcendence, participation in the divine, the primacy of peace, and a complex emphasis on what I call solidity as opposed to arbitrariness.

Why begin the dissertation with a chapter on ontology? First, I accept Charles Taylor’s thesis that ontology matters for our conceptions of ethics – and, therefore, for our conceptions of justice. If it is true, as those I call immanentists claim, that there is an ontological priority accorded to violence, then it is difficult to conceive of a political order which might be peaceful and just. To the contrary, in this case it is more logical always to suspect the presence of power within any order conceived as just. Michel Foucault makes just this kind of point in his famous debate with Noam Chomsky. Second, I think that for RO, the question of ontology is of central importance, and the critique of immanentism and the suggestions in favor of RO’s own Christian ontology prove fundamental for its own theology. In my own dissertation, the claims advanced in this chapter will be, in a way, repeated in all subsequent chapters – and therefore I think it is important to set them out from the beginning.

I divide this chapter into four sections. First I will introduce and attempt to contextualize the so-called “ontological turn” among Leftist philosophers, to which this chapter is both a response and a contribution, and I will also examine the dissident voices of Bruno Bosteels and Susan Buck-Morss, both of whom criticize the Leftist turn to ontology. In sections two and three I detail more extensively the ontologies of immanentism and RO in turn. Finally, in section four I will provide reasons for preferring the ontology of RO to what I have called immanentism.

Here I briefly preview these reasons, which I consider to be of two kinds.

First, I favor RO to immanentism for philosophical reasons, and even because I value philosophy. For if philosophy is to persist, we require concern for truth, even for the Truth, if not

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as something already obtained, then as an ideal to which we may forever aspire, toward which we quest. Yet if the argument I shall advance below is sound, then immanentism descends despite any protests into nihilism, and from that abyss the light of Truth cannot emerge. Moreover, it seems to me that nihilism is manifestly false, but as I will detail later, this sense emerges from a particular perspective within a tradition we might call Augustinian – put most simply in Augustine’s famous claim that “our heart is restless until it rests in [God].” Because, from my Christian perspective, the divine permeates the world – this is the very meaning of incarnational logic – it follows that insofar as we speak of anything at all, anything existent, we already implicitly think and will God, and the whole creation yearns for God. In the words of Henri de Lubac,

Every human act, whether it is an act of knowledge or an act of the will, rests secretly upon God, by attributing meaning and solidity to the real upon which it is exercised. For God is the Absolute; and nothing can be thought without positing the Absolute in relating it to that Absolute; nothing can be willed without tending toward the Absolute, nor valued unless weighed in terms of the Absolute. Such is my own perspective, and I will speak from it in this chapter. However, as we shall see, the difficulty with arguing in favor of RO’s ontology (for which Augustine and de Lubac are tremendous inspirations) is that it may only be internally defended, as it were – there is no external, neutral language with which rationally to defend it. Nevertheless, this is not the same as to claim it cannot be defended. Naturally I will elaborate on this below.

I do not claim originality in advancing philosophical arguments against nihilist immanentism. Many thinkers oppose nihilism in one way or another. The main difference between my argument and those of other political theorists is that I suggest a turn to theology as an

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58 Here I am invoking once more Leo Strauss, whom I discussed at more length in the introduction.
alternative, and here I follow, of course, the RO thinkers. However, the philosophical argument against immanentism is related, I think, to a more political argument, which I shall now sketch briefly.

The second reason I shall advance in favor of RO’s ontology of transcendence and participation against immanentism is political through and through. If I write as a Christian, I also write as a socialist and one committed to abolishing capitalism. It is precisely because of my own socialist orientation that I take great interest in ostensibly Leftist ontological perspectives. However, I believe that immanentism – again, the ontology of choice (or so I shall claim) in Leftist circles today – is fundamentally incapable of effectively resisting neoliberal capitalism precisely because immanentism is, I argue, a philosophical reflection of this system – it mirrors in thought what we readily observe in practice. This is, of course, not an entirely novel argument. Nevertheless, the argument’s lack of novelty does not make it any less important. Furthermore, I want to claim, perhaps somewhat controversially, that a theological ontology of transcendence – that is, RO’s ontology – seems to entail the dismantling of capitalism as we know it. I can put my claims somewhat more clearly: it seems to me that while immanentism bears affinity with the powers of destabilization and deterritorialization unleashed by neoliberal capitalism, in which “all that is solid melts into air,” RO cannot affirm this, precisely because in prioritizing the sacred and indeed the liturgical, RO in fact affirms that which neoliberal capitalism negates. These are,

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61 I mean this term simply to describe our era of capitalism. In other worlds, it is nothing more than the material reality we all experience daily.


then, logics which fundamentally oppose one another. Again, these remarks are simply introductory – I will expand on this further below.

We often wonder when reading papers just what is at stake for the author. What is at stake for me in this dispute between rival ontologies is the possibility of resurrecting of a socialist politics. I suspect that immanentism has become privileged ontology not only among Leftist academics but also among Leftist practitioners or activists – that, in other words, these academic ideas have had some influence on practice. I say this largely from the perspective of an activist, mostly in radical socialist and anarchist circles. It seemed to me that especially the emphasis on the primacy of violence and an emphasis on ultimate ontological arbitrariness and flux were noticeable among my fellow activists. It would be false indeed to claim that this personal experience does not now influence my theoretical and philosophical reflections on Leftist politics, but it is also true, of course, that my own experience was only my own, and I do not doubt other activists have had wildly different experiences. In any case, I say transparently that this study of two ontologies is guided by my view of the relation of theory to practice\(^6\) and, more fundamentally than all else, my conviction that it is absolutely essential to combat neoliberal capitalism and to work toward a socialist politics. I approach this subject, then, as much from the perspective of an activist as a scholar.

1. The Ontological Turn and Its Detractors

What is the ontological turn?

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\(^6\) On this point I have little to add to Milbank when he suggests that "there has to exist a concealed symmetry between the most rarefied expressions of modern thought in "philosophy", on the one hand, and modernity’s collective “political” deeds on the other. See John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2013), 2.
In the words of Bruno Bosteels, we have witnessed a “recent ontological turn in self-anointed Leftist circles.” What is behind the ontological turn? In other words, why are Leftists once again becoming interested in the question of being? Stephen K. White provides a couple possible explanations. First he relates the ontological turn to our awareness that we live within “late” modernity:

The sense of living in late modernity implies a greater awareness of the conventionality of much of what has been taken for certain in the modern West. The recent ontological shift might then be characterized generally as the result of a growing propensity to interrogate more carefully those “entities” presupposed by our typical ways of seeing and doing in the modern world.

Among those entities to which we now direct critical, deconstructive eyes is the disengaged, rational, assertive self. Thus White suggests that “the current turn might now be seen as an attempt to think ourselves, and being in general, in ways that depart from the dominant – but now more problematic – ontological investments of modernity.” In other words, for White the tendency in recent years to investigate being anew relates rather directly to criticisms of received categories of being. It is nearly cliché today to note that much philosophy from the twentieth century devoted itself to demonstrating that so many concepts and ideas and structures once deemed “natural” are nothing of the sort – the entire corpus of Michel Foucault comes to mind, for instance. The importance of such critique is clear for Left-wing politics: the demolition and deconstruction of these purportedly natural concepts allows one always to maintain that the world need not be the

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67 Ibid.
way it is. While White is not necessarily a radical of any sort, democrat or otherwise, his explanation of the ontological turn serves well nevertheless to indicate why that turn might prove attractive for a politically Left-wing perspective.

To my mind this explanation of the ontological turn provides one possible insight into the contrasts between the ontologies I discuss in this chapter. To put the matter simply (perhaps too simply), does the deconstructive project I have described above go all the way down? Is there any solidity or firmness to being, or must our contemporary ontology necessarily be anti- or postfoundationalist and perhaps even arbitrary and nihilistic? Here too White’s explanation is useful, because it is after we have realized that many of our inherited concepts in the West are only conventions that we ask naturally whether there is anything besides convention. Immanentism and RO seem to pull in opposite directions on this question.

Does this explanation of the ontological turn satisfy completely? It probably does not, though I think the above is probably the strongest reason for the resurgence of ontology. Let us consider two additional reasons for turning once again to the study of being, one from Chantal Mouffe and one from Antonio Negri. Mouffe is concerned specifically with properly conceptualizing or ontologizing “the political”. She claims that “it is the lack of understanding of ‘the political’ in its ontological dimension which is at the origin of our current incapacity to think in a political way.” She argues that we have become much too accustomed to thinking of politics only at the “ontic” level of conventional politics. Yet this does not afford us a sufficiently critical

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69 As I have already described briefly and will discuss more below, one of RO’s basic criticisms of immanentism is its ineluctable descent into nihilism. Yet for some on the left nihilism rightly conceived is not to be eluded but welcomed. See for instance Gianni Vattimo, Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law, ed. Santiago Zabala, trans. William McCuag (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
70 I choose these sources because for Bosteels at least they are exemplary in some manner of the ontological turn. However, he does not discuss this sources at all. See Bosteels, The Actuality of Communism, 40–41.
vantage point, and so the turn to the “ontological” view of “the political” is necessary. Meanwhile Negri focuses on the relation of ontology to politics: “When the discourse of emancipation is not based on ontology, it becomes a utopia, an individual dream, and leaves the state of things intact.”

This strikes me as a somewhat straightforwardly Marxist materialist statement. Just as for Marx, for Negri our politics must be grounded in material reality, or at least a theory of material reality, lest we develop beautiful ideas that fail actually to comment on the world we inhabit. Mouffe and Negri then somewhat similarly (indeed, I shall contend below that both are ontological immanentists) turn to the category of ontology in order to reinvigorate a “critical” socialist politics.

However, it may seem as if the supposedly political importance of the ontological turn is too easily presumed. It is important therefore to pause to consider two powerful critics of the ontological turn on the left, Susan Buck-Morss and Bruno Bosteels.

**Detractors to the ontological turn**

Neither Buck-Morss nor Bruno Bosteels celebrate the ontological turn. Each develops a critique of turning to this category (i.e. the ontological) at this time, doubting the political relevance Mouffe and Negri attribute to it. Because I am here writing an essay on ontology, and in defense of a particular ontology, I must briefly address their powerful criticisms of the turn to ontology, for if their criticisms hold, then my defense and advocacy of RO’s ontology of participation is rendered problematic from the beginning.

For both theorists the problem with the ontological turn may be most briefly summarized by quoting from Raoul Vaneigem: “Which imbecile spoke of an ontology of the revolt? The revolt

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is less in need of metaphysics than metaphysicians are in need of a revolt.”73 These are powerful, stirring words! Vaneigem’s point is that there is urgent need for political action, and it is not clear how theorizing about something like ontology might contribute to Left politics. Bosteels also quotes Adorno who argues that “ontology is understood and immanently criticized out of the need for it, which is a problem of its own,” and that ontological answers “meet an emphatic need, a sign of something missed.”74 In keeping with Adorno’s theme, Bosteels claims that “the quest for a Leftist ontology…risks producing an ontologization of Leftism that is as radical as it is empty.”75 Bosteels seems to mean that such an ontologization is “empty” insofar as it is sealed off from politics as such – that it may be nothing more than a response to the absence of longed-for politics. Bosteels concludes by asking “should we not…question the emphatic need for a Leftist ontology as a sign of something missed, namely a truly emancipatory politics?”76 Buck-Morss puts forth a very similar critique of the Leftist ontological turn. She claims firmly that “the attempt to discover within empirical political life (la politique) the ontological essence of the political (le politique) leads theory into a dead end from which there is no return to actual, political practice…The post-metaphysical project of discovering ontological truth within lived existence fails politically.”77

Why does it fail politically? I do not think Buck-Morss is making a quasi-anti-intellectual argument against highly abstract theorizations of politics as such. Rather, Buck-Morss seems to make these claims as a communist (or “commonist”), that is, as an engaged political actor. For instance, she later suggests more clearly the specifically political problem with ontology: “Ontology identifies. Identity was anathema to Adorno, and nowhere more so than in its political

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73 Quoted in Bosteels, “Afterword,” 235.
74 Quoted in ibid.
75 Ibid., 242.
76 Ibid., 250.
implications – the identity between ruler and ruled that fascism affirmed. Indeed, even parliamentary rule can be seen to presuppose a striving for identity, whereby consensus becomes an end in itself regardless of the truth content of that consensus.”

Somehow it seems that focusing on ontology leads to this fetish for identity, which in turn leads to privileging undesirable political forms. Perhaps here Buck-Morss opposes the identifying tendency of ontology to the negative power of dialectics, which Adorno defines as “the consistent sense of nonidentity,” because “the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived.” As with Bosteels, this again implies the importance of a critical political practice as opposed to the need to investigate ontology in theory.

This is much here with which I agree. While I am not sure I accept the Marxist claim that studies of ontology still exist because of the failure of emancipatory politics and the socialist project – that, in other words, the turn to ontology is a sign of a missed opportunity for universal human emancipation – it certainly is true that much Leftist academic activity might be accounted for in precisely these terms. In lieu of a thriving radical movement, in our despair over this lack, many radical Leftists indeed seek the relatively friendlier quarters of the academy where another world may at least be thought if not enacted. It is for this reason that a flurry of political philosophical activity follows even the slightest hint of the rise of an apparently Leftist movement against the status quo – witness the countless special issues of academic journals covering Occupy and more recently the protests and riots in Ferguson, Missouri. This occurs despite the oft-mentioned rift between academic and public life in America. Activists are not, by and large, reading these special issues, yet the special issues materialize nonetheless, partly because of the publishing demands of contemporary academic careers to be sure, but also partly, I suspect,

78 Ibid., 58.
because of the thirst of so many Leftist academics for the emergence of a radical political movement of some sort. I am reminded of Wendy Brown’s observation that “[o]ur political world today is full of power, forces, and events, but rather short on collective action,” and that it is for this reason that we turn ever more toward abstraction in our arguments, to cope with our frustrations.80 Therefore of course I concur with Bosteels and Buck-Morss on the need for on-the-ground political activity.

However, I disagree over means and ends. For Bosteels and Buck-Morss, studies of ontology are, it would seem, at best irrelevant to on-the-ground politics (they are a sign of something missed, after all!). At worst, such studies actually inhibit the growth of radical Leftist politics, condemning us to the political status quo or perhaps even something much worse, namely fascism. But what if it is the case that Bosteels and Buck-Morss have things rather backward? What if disputes over ontology are intimately related to politics? Consider, for instance, that not every ontology might be equally well suited to opposing neoliberal capitalism. In that case ontological disputes cannot be dismissed so easily. Daniel M. Bell Jr. argues, for example, that “[t]he struggle against savage capitalism must be waged at the level of ontology, for capitalism advances not merely by economic victory but by ontological capture.”81 I take this to mean that capitalism imposes on us a view of the world; it captures, so to speak, our ontological imagination such that we take the bizarre everyday reality of capitalism to be essential or normal or unchangeable. Further, Bell’s claim implies, I think, that one task of an immanent critique of Leftist political theory is to examine whether the ontologies of Leftist scholars resist the logic of

capital or, alternatively, serve to mirror that logic. This is part of my task in section four below, where I will contend that immanentism may be conceived as the philosophical-ontological reflection of neoliberal capitalism.

While I sympathize with Bosteels’s and Buck-Morss’s yearning for an effective anticapitalist politics, I agree with Bell that engaging in the study of ontology is an essential intellectual component of the resurrection of that politics. To this end, I will now turn to an examination of the two rival ontologies I mean to discuss.

2. Immanentism

While some Leftist commentators adamantly claim that there is no such thing as a Leftist ontology, there seems nevertheless to emerge from many Leftist scholars a favored ontological vision. I claim that today in the main Leftist thinkers share a general tendency to affirm – some more strongly than others, of course – what I call an immanentist ontology. I shall describe this ontology by noting four of its central characteristics: immanence, the primacy of violence, postfoundationalism, and an emphasis on arbitrariness. Before elaborating on these characteristics of the immanentist ontology, let me clarify what I do not mean to claim. First and foremost I do not mean to claim that all Leftist thinkers without exception affirm an immanentist ontology. As I showed above, some Leftist thinkers, such as Bosteels, do not consider ontology a category that merits serious exploration. Many others, of course, simply pay no mind to the question of ontology.

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83 I am particularly wary of including Alain Badiou as an “immanentist”. In a wonderful essay, Milbank reads Badiou “perversely” as suggesting an underlying unity between socialism, materialism, Platonism, and Christianity. See John Milbank, “The Return of Mediation,” in Paul’s New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Theology, ed. John Milbank, Slavoj Žižek, and Creston Davis (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 211–38.
Others still, such as those scholars associated with Radical Orthodoxy, explicitly affirm an entirely different ontology. Second, I do not mean even to claim that scholars who seem to affirm an immanentist ontology affirm equally all four characteristics I have listed above. Surely we can imagine a Leftist scholar celebrating immanence while dismissing the supposed primacy of violence, for instance. These two reservations compel me to reiterate that I claim only to identify a general tendency among Leftist thinkers to affirm this immanentist ontology, and therefore exceptions are doubtlessly easily discovered. However, exceptions never prove the rule, and I am here unconcerned with them. I hope then that the obvious shortcomings of my heuristic do not too severely hinder its persuasive power. I hope further that what I claim here does not strike readers as too terribly controversial – indeed, as I will show, a survey of ontological claims among contemporary Leftist scholars readily evinces my thesis.

In the remainder of this section I will elaborate on each of the four characteristics of immanentism I noted above.

_Immanence_

Perhaps the most important characteristic of the immanentist ontology is, naturally, a conception of the exclusivity of immanence. Milbank describes this position fairly well, I think: “secular immanence…acknowledges no supra-human power beyond itself by which it might be measured and limited.”\(^{84}\) Milbank, of course, is an opponent of immanence, but his description is in accord with that which many Leftists celebrate. Immanence as I mean it here might well be rendered as the negation of transcendence of any sort – hence I conceptualize the understanding

\(^{84}\) Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 5.
as the *exclusivity* of immanence.\textsuperscript{85} To understand what I mean let us consider some examples.

First, Laclau and Mouffe tell us that

> It is because there are no more assured foundations arising out of a transcendent order, because there is no longer a centre which binds together power, law, and knowledge, that it becomes possible and necessary to unify certain political spaces through hegemonic articulations. But these articulations will always be partial and subject to being contested.\textsuperscript{86}

Such a declaration is today fairly commonplace. For Laclau and Mouffe there are no more assured foundations, by which they presumably mean assured fundaments, or solid ground that is known with certainty, on which to build a politics. Everything today can be questioned, even the deepest basis of our ethical and political beliefs, whether this is God or something like natural law. Let us also note the profoundly anti-theological (or at least anti-Christian) character of this position. The search for a center or for fullness is dismissed as futile from the beginning. Finally, we already obtain a glimpse of why the immanent view is attractive to so many. Without the transcendent order and its demands on us we are left with a brilliant kind of liberation, to be sure, an almost boundless freedom and corresponding sense of possibility. In other words, the freedom that is found with the elimination of the transcendent is precisely the freedom that is the obverse of any sense of solidity.\textsuperscript{87} Solidity itself melts into air.

We also find an ontology of immanence in Hardt and Negri: “all the transcendental determinations of value and measure that used to order the deployments of power (or really determine its prices, subdivisions, and hierarchies) have lost their coherence…Not only the

\textsuperscript{85} It is in any case false to claim that immanence constitutes the precise opposite of transcendence, or if this were true then it would be very difficult to make any sense of the characteristic logic of Christianity in which one comes to know the transcendent through its manifestation in the immanent, with the exemplary case being Jesus Christ himself. But more on this below.

\textsuperscript{86} Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics*, 187.

\textsuperscript{87} For an excellent discussion of Laclau and freedom, see Sorin Radu-Cucu, “Politics and the Fiction of the Political,” in *A Leftist Ontology: Beyond Relativism and Identity Politics*, ed. Carsten Strathausen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 159–67.
political transcendental but also the transcendental as such has ceased to determine measure.”

Furthermore, “[w]hen political transcendence is still claimed today, it descends immediately into tyranny and barbarism.” There are two essential features of Hardt and Negri’s conceptualization of immanence. First, like Laclau and Mouffe, Hardt and Negri posit a historical theory here – whereas transcendence was once an acceptable ontological component, this is “no longer,” and the transcendent “has lost [its] coherence”. It seems that the transcendent ontology simply no longer adequately explains our world, or, to put it another way, our world is such that the transcendent has lost its believability. Interestingly, this view is in accord with Nietzsche who posits as “[t]he greatest recent event – that ‘God is dead,’ that the belief in the Christian God has ceased to be believable.” As the Christian God, and even belief in that God, has ceased to be believable for Nietzsche, so has transcendence ceased to be believable to Laclau, Mouffe, Hardt, and Negri. The second essential feature of Hardt and Negri’s conceptualization of immanence is that they recognize their ontology as contemporaneous with the rise of what they call Empire or what I would call neoliberal capitalism. Indeed, they claim straightforwardly (and I think correctly) that “[c]apital…operates on the plane of immanence, through relays and networks of relationships of domination, without reliance on a transcendent center of power.” In other words, Hardt and Negri have properly historicized their favored ontology and are well aware that theorized ontological immanence in philosophy are a reflection of global economic processes. I will comment further on this idea below, but for now it will suffice for me to say that I am skeptical whether such an ontology might really aid resistance against that which it reflects.

89 Ibid., 355.
91 Hardt and Negri, Empire, 326.
As Milbank noted in the passage I quoted from him earlier in this section, exclusive immanence is also a secular immanence, that is, a belief in the “this-worldly” as opposed to the other-worldly. For this reason, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, I would even claim Slavoj Žižek as an adherent of immanentism. While Žižek has devoted much time in the last two decades or so to writing about Christianity, making him among the foremost philosophers of the theological turn in continental philosophy, it remains the case that Žižek reads Christianity through a transparently materialist lens. He argues that “we should reread Christ’s resurrection in a materialist way,” and that, quite paradoxically, “Christianity is alive only in materialist (atheist) practices which negate it.” This argument takes me to a broader, properly Milbankian point: any ontology that posits the self-sufficiency of the material is itself an instance of immanence, that is, the negation of transcendence. Now, this is something of an extensive argument since the left is built largely on the tradition of (Marxist) materialism, and indeed I mean to claim that any such materialism – again, where the material is posited as self-sufficient, in need of nothing more than itself – amounts to immanence in the sense I mean here. With this in mind, it is perhaps clearer just how widespread the belief in immanence in academic Leftist circles.

The primacy of violence

How does the immanent frame appear? Does it manifest itself peacefully or violently? If I am right then for adherents of immanentism our world of immanence is marked through and

through with violence. As Carsten Strathausen puts it, “social conflict is inevitable.”93 That is to say, there is no possible future defined primarily by reconciliation and peace. To the contrary, the social world is composed of antagonistic wills and forces that ineluctably come into conflict despite the mediating power of institutions. The situation is rather like that described by Foucault who famously claimed, reversing Clausewitz’s dictum, that politics is war by other means, or in other words that conflict and battle are most fundamentally. As such, the concept of antagonism comes to the fore, as in the work of Laclau and Mouffe: “The central role that the notion of antagonism plays in our work forecloses any possibility of a final reconciliation, of any kind of rational consensus, of a fully inclusive ‘we’.”94 We have here a fairly clear statement that violence obtains ontological primacy.

In the wonderful volume of essays from which I have already been citing liberally, called A Leftist Ontology, William Rasch argues for the ontological primacy of violence most clearly:

I presuppose an ontological priority of violence…I see the political as a means of limiting but never eliminating violence (and its varied sublimated forms) in social life. The stress on limitation rather than elimination (limited war rather than perpetual peace, for example) is based on pragmatic rather than ontological, anthropological, or psychological considerations, though these cannot be completely avoided. It assumes that theories of ultimate pacification are either unrealizable (no matter how ideal the speech situation in a global public sphere may be), or, worse, lead, by way of a violence to end all violence, to total wars (and totalitarian suppression).95

This is a refreshingly bold declaration. For Rasch, then, violence is what there is, and peace is an aberration. Further, attempts to create peace can be immensely dangerous, leading as they might to totalitarian suppression. We should therefore consider eruptions of violence to be fairly commonplace if unfortunate. It is worthwhile to note that Rasch’s is a very pagan view of the

94 Laclau and Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics, xvii.
95 Rasch, “The Structure of the Political vs. the Politics of Hope,” 4.
world.\textsuperscript{96} Perhaps it is this paganism that commits Rasch to count himself among “those who are content to see messiahs crucified wherever and whenever they make their appearance”.\textsuperscript{97} In a bizarre twist, Rasch’s fear of the ultimately violent and even totalitarian consequences of “theories of ultimate pacification” leads him to call for the ultimate violent act itself, the crucifixion of the messiah, of the bringer of hope and complete reconciliation. Is it not ironic that, in the name of limited violence, Rasch sides finally, apparently, with the forces of the world against Christ himself?\textsuperscript{98}

\textit{Postfoundationalism}

It almost goes without saying that postfoundationalism constitutes today the \textit{sine qua non} of purportedly Leftist philosophies. Indeed we have already come across postfoundationalist philosophies in the cited passages of Laclau and Mouffe and Hardt and Negri above. There are no assured foundations anymore, there is no objective measure of man, etc. Indeed, it is true that no essay in \textit{A Leftist Ontology} calls for anything like foundationalism. Of course, such a call is almost unthinkable today. If we accept Oliver Marchart’s definition of postfoundationalism as the “constant interrogation of metaphysical figures of foundation – such as totality, universality, essence, and ground,”\textsuperscript{99} then it is perhaps unsurprising that these contributors, almost all post-Marxists or post-Heideggerians, are also postfoundationalists. As Bosteels puts it,

If there is a common presupposition shared by all present-day ontologies touched on in \textit{[A Leftist Ontology]}, it is that ontology is not, cannot be, or must not be a

\textsuperscript{96} On this point, see Milbank, \textit{Being Reconciled}, 26–43, especially 33; see also David Bentley Hart, \textit{The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 1–34.
\textsuperscript{97} Rasch, “The Structure of the Political vs. the Politics of Hope,” 11.
question of substance or of the absolute. It presupposes neither the presence of being nor the identity of being and thinking as a guide for acting. On the contrary, ontology is here described as spectral, nonidentical, and postfoundational. It tries to come to terms not with present beings, but with ghosts and phantasms.\textsuperscript{100}

Postfoundationalism describes the groundlessness of being. It further entails an emphasis on contingency, because there is no absolute which might undergird solidity.

Why do so many Leftist philosophers espouse postfoundationalism today? What is so attractive about it from a Left-wing perspective? Carsten Strathausen helps to explain: “What renders these various [ontological] models ‘Leftist’ is the shared belief in the historical malleability of the (paradoxical) ontological terrain they investigate.”\textsuperscript{101} However, this simply brings us to another question. Why is the ontology which posits the essential malleability and plasticity of being “Leftist”? While Strathausen himself suggests that this is the case because it shows “[t]here is nothing natural about the social world at all,”\textsuperscript{102} it seems to me that the utter contingency of our political and social world might prove “Rightist” as easily as “Leftist.” When neo-Nazis read of such contingency (obviously in a hypothetical universe), do they brim with hope, telling their comrades that there is still a chance, despite the failures of the twentieth century? If not, why not?

In any case, it is certainly understandable why the Left is veritably obsessed with the contingency of all foundations for politics in the years after 1989. The socialist project appeared then, as it still appears now, as doomed, failed, an historical curiosity for scholars but a phrase beyond irrelevant for the working class. However, armed with a tremendously powerful postfoundationalist ontology, Leftists may gleefully carry on with critical theory at the universities, knowing full well that neoliberal capitalism only \textit{appears} to be omnipotent, that resistance silently swells in the interstices, and that soon one of those beloved Events shall burst forth and rent the

\textsuperscript{100} Bosteels, “Afterword,” 236.
\textsuperscript{101} Strathausen, “Introduction: Thinking Outside In,” xxvi.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
present world mercifully asunder. Or at least, we tell our comrades with a wink, such a thing is theoretically possible.

**Arbitrariness**

While many Leftist political theorists and philosophers claim an affinity for immanence, postfoundationalism, or the ontological primacy of violence, few in fact claim to admire arbitrariness. To oversimplify for a moment, while contingency and postfoundationalism are clearly good, arbitrariness is bad. Therefore my claim that immanentists emphasize arbitrariness in ontology is my own claim, and I must defend it. The argument I will briefly advance here goes something like this: because the realm of being is shed of transcendence and all ultimate foundations, and because being is therefore wholly marked by contingency, it is also necessarily marked by arbitrariness. Any account of the world is in the last instance merely contingent, and therefore politics is likewise wholly contingent. This means, as many Leftists celebrate, any such accounts may always be legitimately challenged, and in the last instance there is no good reason for privileging any account over any other. Arbitrariness is the expression of a latent nihilism, and part of my argument is that Leftist immanentists cannot escape this charge.

Let us consider first the manner in which William Connolly defends the contributors to *A Leftist Ontology* of a charge similar to arbitrariness, namely relativism: “None is a relativist, because each advances arguments and invitations designed to draw others to his or her orientation. And each thinks that some possible ontopolitical orientations fall below a minimal threshold for inclusion in the contest.”103 Curiously, the concept of truth does not appear in Connolly’s defense.

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However, I think relativism, or the view that every view is as good as any other, can be defeated philosophically only through reference to truth. That Connolly wants to exclude some views is one thing, but on what basis are these views excluded? A powerful tyrant may well exclude others through the arbitrary use of power, but it seems strange to me to suggest that this practice demonstrates that the tyrant is not a relativist. In order to show that one is not a relativist, it must be shown that one does not exclude arbitrarily, but Connolly has not shown this. Why do the contributors hold their orientations, why do they exclude others, and how does this relate to the truth? In my view, the answer to this question would show much better whether they are relativists.

I will now cite some instances in which I think Leftists evince the arbitrariness with which I have charged them. Alberto Moreiras tells us that “[i]n life without texture, life without being, life without bios, accessible only through the experience of degrounding, in itself a consequence of the revelation of the death of God, the possibility and hence the solidity of an encounter with the last god – as the void of compact fullness – opens up.” Admittedly this is a rather difficult passage. I take Moreiras essentially to provide us with a nihilistic kind of thesis, a nihilistic ontology that lends itself to arbitrariness. I gather this from his reference to Nietzsche, from his mention of a “last god” – presumably this means that after we dispense with this god there shall be no other, a very Nietzschean sentiment of course – and his mention of “the void of compact fullness.” This latter notion I take to mean that fullness is an illusion – that within the very concept of fullness lurks the void or nothingness. This would point to the ontological primacy of nothingness, and it is not clear to me how this is not the same thing as nihilism.

Sorin Radu-Cucu, meanwhile, similarly refers to an “absent fullness” and calls for “a weak ontology, whose aim is not to create the foundational certainty of a dialectical ordering of history.

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but to inscribe political desire into the discursive production of emptiness.”\textsuperscript{105} Again this is a somewhat difficult passage, yet Radu-Cucu seems to favor an ontology which will produce a political desire for emptiness or nothingness. However, from such an emptiness it seems at least possible that anything might be derived – a function I think similar to the well-known facet of formal logic, where anything at all may be derived from a contradiction. Indeed, this analogy is, as it turns out, not so different from the ontology Radu-Cucu has in mind. Following Laclau, Radu-Cucu suggests that “the impossibility of a fully constituted society points toward an originary disjuncture at the core of Being.”\textsuperscript{106} That is, for Radu-Cucu being itself is constituted “at the core” by a lack, an emptiness, a nothingness. But as I suggested above using different language, where there is nothing, there may be anything. In other words, nihilism gives birth, it would seem, to a condition of essential arbitrariness. In such a condition, politics indeed has gone all the way down such that politics is “everywhere” in for me a very frightening sense, frightening because it would then seem that reality and the reality of politics is determined by the outcome of a violent, antagonistic encounter. This sounds to me much too Nietzschean. Better, I think, to heed the words of Milbank when he argues that “[t]he attempt to bend [Nietzsche and Heidegger’s] diagnoses of the historical sway of arbitrary power to the cause of ‘emancipation’ was never truly plausible.”\textsuperscript{107} What Milbank means is that if we begin with an assertion that all there is, is power, then it is not clear how a good society build on relationships of solidarity might emerge. After all, the assertion that everything is power already excludes the reality of the truly good, exposing the latter as but another instance of ultimately arbitrary power.

\textsuperscript{105} Radu-Cucu, “Politics and the Fiction of the Political,” 162.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 163.
\textsuperscript{107} Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason}, xiii.
There is another way of expressing the contradiction I am pointing towards: the Leftist theorists I have been discussing believe in a liquid reality in which everything apparently settled and natural is in fact an instance of disguised power. Thus power is everywhere, politics is everywhere, and contestation is everywhere. Yet while these Leftist theorists deconstruct purported goods with one hand, they cling to a vision of a good society with the other – all, after all, are anti-capitalist socialists. Yet they have eliminated from the beginning the possibility of reasonably defending the moral claims intrinsic to a socialist politics. Socialism is either more just than capitalism, or else it is yet another instance of arbitrary power, and its defense is, in that case, by definition extra-reasonable. Thus these theorists at once wish to unmask morality as power and cling themselves to a different moral vision.

I have already implied that I detect a connection between the four characteristics of the ontology I have called immanentism. I shall now explain this connection as clearly as I can. The favoring of immanence against transcendence seems, from a theological view, to necessitate postfoundationalism, contingency, arbitrariness, and ultimately even nihilism. Why is this? Milbank argues, in rare elegant prose, that “[m]atter can only ‘matter’ if it expresses that which, unlike itself, has its cause in itself, which must be spiritual or trans-spiritual.”\(^\text{108}\) The immanentist ontology seems to be precisely the Christian ontology of transcendence with, of course, God subtracted. Yet on the Christian conception, immanentism as I have described it is almost precisely what would develop once God “dies,” because matter is radically insufficient in itself in the manner Milbank describes. Without a transcendent order and without the Resurrection it seems to me commonsensical that we would then posit the ontological primacy of violence. When looking at

the world as it immediately appears to us, without the light of faith, we see violence. Its primacy for the immanentist is thus clear.

In the next section I will describe four main characteristics of the ontology of Radical Orthodoxy (RO). We shall see that this is a very different ontology.

3. Radical Orthodoxy

RO is a somewhat recent Christian theological orientation or “symphony”109 based out of Cambridge, England, but which has in the last two decades or so left its native English shores to influence theology and the humanities more generally in Western Europe and North America. The primary figures associated with RO are, most importantly, John Milbank, and then Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward. In this chapter, and indeed in this dissertation, I will mainly focus on Milbank, simply because he is by far the most influential of the three. All of the RO theologians are interested in commenting upon and sustaining dialogue with contemporary continental philosophy, along with advancing a socialist politics. What are the central tenets of RO? The clue seems to me to be in the name. Theologians associated with RO emphasize first orthodoxy, or remaining faithful to Catholic Christianity somewhat broadly conceived. This should not be confused with Eastern Orthodoxy or Barthian Neo-orthodoxy. Instead, RO concerns itself with what the three aforementioned theologians call “credal Christianity and the exemplarity of its patristic matrix.”110 Second, RO is “radical” in at least two ways. First it is committed returning to the “roots” of the faith – to the Gospel and to the church fathers. In this way it has more than a

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109 James K. A. Smith, Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 70.
little in common with the French Nouvelle Théologie represented by figures like Henri de Lubac and Jean Daniélou.\textsuperscript{111} The second sense in which RO is radical is politically: the theology commits itself to a radical politics, namely socialism.\textsuperscript{112} I shall describe RO’s socialist politics at more length in chapter 4.

As in section 2, here I shall describe what I take to be four central characteristics of RO’s ontology in turn: transcendence and suspension, participation, peace, and solidity.

*Transcendence and suspension*

According the introduction of the seminal set of essays in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, “only transcendence, which ‘suspends’ [embodied life, self-expression, sexuality, aesthetic experience and human political community] in the sense of interrupting them, ‘suspends’ them also in the other sense of upholding their relative worth over-against the void.”\textsuperscript{113} In other words, for RO, as in Christianity generally,\textsuperscript{114} the transcendent divine is not simply absent from or, conversely, wholly separated from the world. Rather, the world itself is saturated with the divine – or better, that the world exists *only* due to God’s grace. RO plays on the word “suspends” in order to signify this. The first suspension of the material is a properly Kierkegaardian suspension. That is, the material is “suspended” in the sense that worldly ends are superseded by divine ends. The second suspension is in the same sense that a fruit is suspended in the air by the tree branch. It is because the immanent is suspended in this sense, because the immanent is a

\textsuperscript{111} On this point, see John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).
\textsuperscript{112} See Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, chap. 9.
\textsuperscript{113} Milbank, Ward, and Pickstock, “Suspending the Material: The Turn of Radical Orthodoxy,” 3.
\textsuperscript{114} Of course, I shall cease using this phrase precisely because RO is only successful insofar as it faithfully reflects, elaborates, and carries forth orthodox Christianity. Therefore it should be obvious that what is true for RO is true (or should be true) for orthodox Christianity more generally.
creation of God, that it is endowed necessarily with a kind of teleology, whose end is God’s kingdom. Thus, unlike in immanentism, for RO the world yearns naturally beyond itself, and yet also toward itself.

Through this “suspension” model of transcendence, I think the RO theologians are aiming at a Christian vision which does not negate the world entirely but instead lifts it up, anchors it to the transcendent divine, and thereby accords value to the worldly. Thus RO’s vision is very much different, for instance, from Arendt’s famous discussion of the “two world theory,” in which mere appearance is contrasted with true Being, and the former is denigrated at the expense of the latter.\textsuperscript{115} RO’s claim is twofold: not only is this not how it conceives of transcendence, but also, historically, the claim is that this is not how the Church fathers conceived of transcendence.\textsuperscript{116} What explains RO’s difference from the two-world theory in this respect, i.e. insofar as transcendence does not denigrate but rather lifts up the world?

The answer is RO’s embrace of incarnational theology.\textsuperscript{117} God is not simply over-and-above the world, but rather God actively becomes involved in the world, most obviously and, for the Christian, most perfectly in the figure of Jesus, but also more simply in the sense that God is not conceived as some “other” over-and-against the world. This strikes me as a properly Catholic theological stance,\textsuperscript{118} perhaps similar to Jean-Luc Marion’s discussion of the meaning of the icon (as distinguished from the idol). Whereas for Marion the idol is a mirror, referring back to the gaze of the one who looks upon it, “the icon summons sight in letting the visible…be saturated little by little with the invisible…The gaze can never rest or settle if it looks at an icon; it must always

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\textsuperscript{116} While I wish to note this historical claim of RO, I shall not defend it in this dissertation. Rather I shall defend the arguments RO advances.
\textsuperscript{117} Milbank, Ward, and Pickstock, “Suspending the Material: The Turn of Radical Orthodoxy,” 4.
\textsuperscript{118} Milbank himself is explicit that he conceives of his vision as Catholic. See Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason}, xi.
\end{flushleft}
rebound upon the visible, in order to go back in it up the infinite stream of the invisible.”\(^{119}\) Though the icon does not, of course, fully make visible the invisible, it does direct one’s gaze beyond the (finite) icon itself and toward the (infinite) invisible. For my purposes the importance of Marion’s discussion of the icon is the way in which it demonstrates the Catholic sense that the divine is not utterly separate from the world, but rather that it permeates the world through and through. I wonder also whether Pickstock’s fascinating discussion of the smoke of incense (in the liturgy of the Roman Rite) as a “cloud of divine embodiment” which “descends upon us, revesting us in a holy garment”\(^{120}\) is here relevant – once again, the symbolism here is that of the divine descending to us, reaching out to us, before, of course, ascending to invisibility.

What is the good of transcendence? Why might RO hearken back to it? My reading of RO suggests to me that transcendence ensures that being does not collapse into “the flux of things,” which for RO is “an empty flux, both concealing and revealing an ultimate void.”\(^{121}\) As I note above, the basic strategy of RO is to accept postmodern skepticism toward supposedly natural or neutral categories – to accept what Milbank calls the “absolute historicism” characteristic of postmodern thought – and yet also to avoid the conclusion of the “ultimate void” or nihilism through a scheme in which the concept of narrative is given supreme importance. I shall note below that this renders RO extremely complex, because it rules out the possibility of it taking the form of a foundationalism akin to, e.g. Cartesian foundationalism.

\textit{Participation}


\(^{120}\) Catherine Pickstock, \textit{After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy} (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 188.

As the above already implies, for RO all existent things participate in the divine. Jamie Smith explains: “Every sphere of creation, and our inhabitance of it (including the labors of human poiesis and culture making), participates in the primal gift of the creator.” Milbank reiterates this point: “I have always tried to suggest that participation can be extended also to language, history and culture: the whole realm of human making. Not only do being and knowledge participate in a God who is and who comprehends; also human making participates in a God who is infinite poetic utterance: the second person of the Trinity.” Because of this emphasis on participating in divinity, the category of liturgy has come to be a category of profound importance for RO – indeed, one of RO’s aims is to reconceive all of human life as liturgical. What this means, I think, is that for RO, because a central ontological aspect of human being is participation in divinity, it may also be understood preeminentely as worship.

What the incarnational logic of participation entails, however, will not sit easily for anyone committed to secularism: “every discipline must be framed by a theological perspective; otherwise these disciplines will define a zone apart from God, grounded in literally nothing.” Why this apparently hubristic attitude? For RO, things are only to the extent that they participate in God – there is no power of being inhering in things themselves. In themselves, things of the world, the entire immanent frame, the material as such, is nothing. But with God and through God the material is exulted to a properly divine status. Further, because the material is in fact creation, it is, on the Christian perspective, never divorced from God but always participates in the divine. But because of the fact of creation, because God permeates all things, there is nothing at all that can be

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122 Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology*, 75.
understood apart from God. From this vantage point we can understand the academic project of RO, so to speak: “the true telos of the RO project is not simply a theology but a comprehensive Christian account of every aspect of the world.”

Why does RO seek to provide such a comprehensive account? The answer is that RO refuses the story of secularism, or of any self-sufficient reason or rationality, and instead takes its moorings entirely from the Christian story, in which, as I have briefly described, participation in divinity is a central ontological fact.

One central component of the tale RO wishes to tell is that, while for us moderns this kind of narrative of participation in divinity might sound downright ludicrous, things were not always so. Milbank, of course, is at pains to tell this story throughout *Theology and Social Theory*, the opening line of which tells one of his most important theses, namely that once there was no secular, i.e. no sphere somehow divorced from divinity. Pickstock also tells this story in her own manner, noting, for instance, that in the medieval era, all of music – as all of culture – was liturgically conceived: “The conception of music at this period was in fact strictly liturgical.”

True of the medieval era, we might say, but surely this can no longer be true. However, I think a tenet of RO is that, in fact, there is no good reason even today to exclude such a liturgical conception. Once again, an important line of reasoning behind RO’s return to an emphasis on participation is the notion that in this way the things of the world might not fall into the nothing of the void but might themselves be divinized and, thereby, accrued with true value. So conceived, I think that it is evident why this vision might prove appealing, even among those who choose not ultimately to subscribe to it.

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126 Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology*, 69.

Finally, there is, importantly, a social or political entailment to the story of participation in divinity and the corresponding emphasis accorded to liturgy: “the liturgical worship of God, as understood by the Church Fathers, is, in its full reality, a work which involves a generous approach to others which further transmits the divine gift and a use of all created things which respects their given and valuable nature as signed with the character of the divine giver.”\textsuperscript{128} Within the narrative of Christianity itself, within the narrative established through the New Testament, Milbank’s claim here makes sense. If we take the first letter of John seriously, then we must attend to his claim that God is love, and if God is love, and if we are to participate in love, then then entails a commandment which governs our conduct with others, namely to treat them in accord with love understood as \textit{agape}. All of this, of course, is in accord with one of the commandments issued by Jesus, namely to love one another as Jesus loved his followers.

\textit{The primacy of peace}

If immanentism erects violence to a position of ontological primacy, RO contrarily insists on the primacy of peace. Milbank takes this ontological doctrine from Saint Augustine, for whom he contends it constitutes “the principle undergirding Augustine’s critique” in his \textit{City of God}.\textsuperscript{129} For Augustine, Milbank claims, the peace at issue here is not just the temporary peace witnessed when one antagonist emerges victorious over another, but “real peace, which is a state of harmonious agreement, based upon a common love, and a realization of justice for all.”\textsuperscript{130} A realist might contend that such a peace is in fact humanly impossible. Indeed, Milbank accepts just this.

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\textsuperscript{128} Milbank, \textit{Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People}, 127.
\textsuperscript{129} Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason}, 392.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 393.
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For him, as for the Church Fathers, “peace becomes a transcendental attribute of Being.” In other words, peace is primary precisely because it is of God. As Milbank notes, and as I discuss at more length below, there is no way of demonstrating the priority of peace outside of the Truth of the Christian narrative itself. Nevertheless, it strikes me that it is a key for the hope of an earthly order other than the order of barbaric violence to which we have become accustomed, and it is perhaps purely for the beauty of this vision that we might prefer it.

What is Milbank’s ontology of peace? What does it look like? For Milbank, as he presents his case in *Theology and Social Theory*, the ontology of peace is the opposite of the ontology of violence. Rather than conceive of being as fundamentally conflictual, Milbank adopts the view that conflict is aberrant, and instead, as we see in the exemplar of exemplars, Jesus, peace is accorded primacy. More positively, Milbank speaks of his vision of “an ‘ontology of peace’, which conceives differences as analogically related, rather than equivocally at variance.” I understand Milbank to mean that, with the Christian vision, as read through RO, it is possible to read differences as fundamentally harmonic rather than fundamentally conflictual, and this, in turn, holds out hope for a social order in which differences are represented in this manner. For Milbank and the other RO theologians, such an order is advanced, at its best, by the Church, which constitutes something of a counter-polis. Practically, what this means seems to be simply that the Church ought to derive norms of human relations from its own story, rather than borrowing from secular society.

Paradoxically, among the philosophers to whom we might turn if we wish to learn about the Christian ontological priority of peace is Nietzsche: according to Milbank, “Nietzsche was

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131 Ibid., 440.
132 Ibid.
133 Ibid., 279.
134 Ibid., 410f.
objectively right to the extent that Christianity is unique in refusing ultimate reality to all conflictual phenomena.\textsuperscript{135} Thus, for Milbank, Nietzsche was indeed correct to observe that Christianity is “effeminate” insofar as it refuses violence, and that it negates ancient (and modern) conceptions of, say, glory in warfare.

\textit{Solidity}

I believe RO points to what I want to call solidarity precisely because it entails the negation of pure arbitrariness, which I claimed above is the obverse of nihilism. In positing divinity, being itself, the act of \textit{to be} itself, there is a divine order bestowed on all things, including aesthetic, ethical, and political things. Indeed, Milbank claims that “the aesthetic and the ethical,” or, in my reading, the beautiful and the good, “are ontological objective realities.”\textsuperscript{136} In other words, once again a central aim of RO is to ensure that the void, or the nothing, does not consume all things, but instead especially the true, the beautiful, and the good stand tall, tethered to or suspended by divinity itself.

Once again it is worth recalling that RO conceives of itself as a restatement of the Christian story – indeed, this is precisely how Milbank and others conceive of it, though it is a restatement that, in their view, serves as a corrective to Christian theologies which either cede too much to secularism or else do not sufficiently conceive the Christian story politically, as entailing engagement with the world. For me, perhaps the most interesting and most novel aspects of RO concern not the vision itself but its justification. Milbank is adamant, for instance, that his vision

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 262.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 275.
is “postmodern,” which he defines as absolute historicism. What then does it mean for Milbank’s Christian vision to be conceived in a postmodern fashion?

Most simply, I think what Milbank means to claim is that the Christian story, as read by RO, is indeed nothing more than a story among other stories, but it is a good story. So put, this may seem almost comical, but perhaps this conception will make more sense if we consider a few key passages in which Milbank explicates just how his theology is postmodern.

First, let us consider Milbank’s interesting objection to George Lindbeck’s conception of Christian metanarrative realism. For my purposes, what is most important is not Lindbeck’s view itself but Milbank’s critique of it. According to Milbank, in Lindbeck’s view “Christians are seen as living within certain fixed narratives which function as schemas…These ‘hypostasized’ narratives are not seen as belonging within the sequence of history itself but instead as atemporal categories for Christian understanding…[Lindbeck] thereby converts metanarrative realism into a new narratological foundationalism and fails to arrive at a postmodern theology.”¹³⁷ What is Milbank saying here? To what is he objecting? I think the key words are “fixed,” “hypostasized,” and “atemporal.” With all of these words, Milbank tries to say that, in Lindbeck’s theology, the Christian story ceases to be conceived as a living one, and instead becomes something of a dead set of propositions applied icily to the vicissitudes of the world. It is in this precise manner that Milbank speaks of Lindbeck’s view as a “narratological foundationalism”: quite literally, the Christian story ceases to be a particular story emerging from within a context, with all the messiness that entails, and it becomes instead dead text, and a means for simple, determinative judgments, allowing for particular events and experiences encountered in the world to be ordered deductively, like conclusions from premises in a syllogism.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 388.
Milbank’s alternative places much greater emphasis on the Christian narrative as a narrative, a story to be told and retold, from which something is irrevocably lost if that narrative is somehow translated into a set of dead propositions. He writes,

"we do not relate to the story of Christ by schematically applying its categories to the empirical content of whatever we encounter. Instead, we interpret this narrative in a response which inserts us in a narrative relation to the ‘original’ story…Hence the metanarrative is not just the story of Jesus, it is the continuing story of the Church, already realized in a fully exemplary way by Christ, yet still to be realized universally, in harmony with Christ, and yet differently, by all generations of Christians."\(^{138}\)

The idea seems to be to conceive of the Christian story as one which must, after all, be told again and again, a story which is never “over and done with” but reveals new valences as Christians live different lives and encounter profoundly different experiences. How does the story of Christ appear to the white American teenager in the suburbs? To the undocumented immigrant in southern California? To the Congolese priest summoned to a Western country to help handle the shortage of priests? Milbank’s hope – and I wonder whether it can ever be anything but a hope – is that each of these experiences might shed new light on the same Christian story – that the latter might be able to cope with profound differences without ceasing to be a single story read in many different ways.

Another insight in the above passage is that the Christian story is in fact not over and done with, nor is it in principle ever over and done with while we persist in this world, in fallen time. This is not only because Christians await the second coming, it is also because the Church’s mission is ongoing. This mission cannot be understood according to what Milbank calls “the liberal-Protestant metanarrative,” according to which faith becomes a wholly private matter. Rather, the Church, for Milbank, must take the form of a public encounter with the world. This is

\(^{138}\) Ibid., 389.
one way of making sense of Milbank’s claim that his theory “is first and foremost an ecclesiology.” A model here, both for me and for Milbank, is St. Paul, who does not cling privately to his faith after his conversion but goes out into the world to spread the gospel, facing persecution along the way. I shall return to St. Paul in the next chapter.

In an effort to become a little clearer still, if possible, about the postmodern nature of Milbank’s theology, let us consider one more passage, in which Milbank emphasizes the “intratextual” nature of his metanarrative realism: “one can only stick fast by the principle of ‘intratextuality’ – the idea that theology is an explication of the developing and rationally unfounded Christian cultural code – if one seeks for one’s fundamental principles of critique within the Christian ‘text’, and not in some universal, and so foundationalist, principle of ‘suspicion.’” I think this passage sheds some light both on what Milbank thinks he is doing and just why Milbank contends he is not positing a new “foundationalism,” even while steadfastly opposing nihilism. Milbank seeks the principles of his critique of secular reason, along with the principles of his counter-ontology, not from any purportedly rational foundation that is fixed and always-already available to all, if only we would properly attune our minds. Instead he proceeds from a text, from a particular narrative, a particular story, one which has not finished once and for all but is still ongoing in the life of the Church. It is impossible to justify this story in terms of some neutral, rational language. Thus, while a major task of Milbank’s theology is to identify and respond to nihilism, he claims that “the only possible response to nihilism is to affirm one’s allegiance to a particular tradition, and derive an ontology from assumptions of its narrative

139 Ibid., 382.
140 Ibid., 393.
forms.” If one accepts Milbank’s critique of the concept of neutral reason, this is perhaps indeed the only course left to us.

I wonder, however, whether Milbank’s conception of “foundationalism” is ultimately too narrow, and whether it is not possible to contend that he is positing a different kind of foundationalism, one which is undergirded ultimately by faith. This is, at least, how I read him. What I am thinking of here is, I think, fairly straightforward: though it is not the case that Milbank advances his Christian ontology and narrative as a straightforward substitute for purportedly neutral secular reason, it is nevertheless true that for Milbank the Christian story provides a ground which gives to being precisely the solidity I suggested above. Does this mean Milbank posits some sort of “nonfoundationalist” foundationalism? I would prefer not to posit such a clunky concept. Instead, I suggest Milbank simply offers a different kind of foundationalism, one which is, obviously, very different from the foundationalism he opposes.

Finally, I want to suggest that Milbank’s project, and correspondingly the project of RO as such, might be understood as Kierkegaardian, by which I mean that it is based, ultimately, on a leap of faith not wholly translatable into dialectical reason. Though Milbank ultimately wishes to propose an Augustinian narrative according to which faith is not simply to be opposed to reason, he does claim that his vision is in the end “based on faith, not reason.” Should this bother us? I claim it should not, so long as we accept Milbank’s postmodern skepticism toward secular reason: for him it is quite clear that the latter is, in fact, itself a statement of faith, nothing more than an alternative mythos, to which theology presents itself as a counter-mythos.

4. Two Arguments in Favor of RO

141 Ibid., 262.
142 Ibid., 390.
To conclude I wish briefly to return to the two kinds of arguments in favor of RO’s ontology I suggested at the outset of this chapter, the first a more philosophical argument, the second more directly and clearly political.

*The philosophical argument*

As I have just noted, although Milbank is clear that there is no external reasoning to which one might refer in order to show the superiority of RO’s ontology, he does, in fact, seem to provide us some reasons for preferring his vision, but these reasons, once again, cannot be conceived as external to the Christian narrative as he reads it. First, he clarifies that “from the point of view of 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.”\(^{143}\) That is, Milbank raises the possibility that his Christian ontology does nothing more than to point to what is truly desirable, what is desirable in itself, that which our heart truly seeks. Second, because immanentist nihilism ultimately reveals the *nihil* even within human reason itself, “it becomes possible to argue that a Catholic perspective saves not just the human bias towards peace and order, but also the human bias towards reason.”\(^{144}\) Because, in other words, we recognize the essential importance of human reason, we must favor that ontology which preserves reason. Behind both of these reasons is the central suggestion – but it can only be a suggestion – that RO provides a non-nihilistic theology-as-philosophy, that is, a positive ontology which does not succumb to nihilism, unlike immanentism.

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\(^{143}\) Ibid., xvi.

\(^{144}\) Ibid., xvii.
However, to the relentless Nietzschean who happily dismisses both of these arguments in turn, we must recognize that RO has absolutely nothing to offer. This is an unavoidable consequence of the fact that, for RO, truth is itself an attribute of God, and therefore if the account elaborated from God as a premise does not persuade, there is nowhere else to turn. However, I do not think things are after all so very dire. David Bentley Hart, for instance, accepts that there is no neutral objective rationality to which we might refer, but he claims that it is the internal beauty, truth, and coherence of the Christian vision that provides its most persuasive and compelling argument against rival ontologies.\textsuperscript{145} Thus, while there are no proofs of RO’s Christian ontology, nor even any straightforward rational arguments in favor of it, this is not the same as to claim there are simple \textit{no} reasons for preferring it.

\textit{The political argument}

I have already alluded to my political reason for preferring RO to immanentism. Namely, it seems to me that immanentism in fact reflects the very logic of capital, which is a logic of de-grounding, of hybridity, of deterritorialization, of profaning all things holy, of flattening, of centrifuge. My claim is simply that an ontology that privileges all of these things cannot actually resist them. This argument strikes me as persuasive, but it is in fact contrary to many of the arguments that hold much sway on the left today. Alain Badiou, for instance, claims that “desacralization…is obviously the only thing we must welcome within Capital,” because it exposes us finally to our real conditions of life – an argument, incidentally, I take to be faithful to Marx’s own arguments.\textsuperscript{146} Perhaps, then, in celebrating an ontology reflective of neoliberal

\textsuperscript{146} Badiou, \textit{Manifesto for Philosophy}, 56.
capitalism we may hope to overcome it. This argument bears some resemblance to a purely negative dialectics, since there is here only negation (i.e. the negating power of capital) but no negation of the negation. However, it seems plain now that capitalism will not magically end in its own destruction, nor will an immanentist ontology conduce somehow to socialism. It is much more likely that the radical left, possessed by this ontology, held captive by this picture, will remain in its present condition of helplessness, as one who cries out in the wilderness, but without any object of desire conceived, however hazily, in that desperate cry.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued in favor of RO’s ontology of participation and against the immanentist ontology I have associated with theorists of radical democracy. Establishing reasons to prefer the former is an important part of the dissertation project as a whole, because this ontology forms the bedrock upon which all further claims shall rest. Furthermore, this ontology constitutes an important first part of the present attempt to defend Radical Orthodoxy as an orientation which may both defeat nihilism and, in turn, hold up the ability reasonably to defend the normative claims of a socialist politics. I shall now turn to a consideration of secularism, another area in which Radical Orthodoxy is at odds with radical democracy.
CHAPTER III
SECULARISM

In the midst of history, the judgement of God has already happened. And either the Church enacts the vision of paradisal community which this judgement opens out, or else it promotes a hellish society beyond any terrors known to antiquity: corruptio optimi pessima. – Milbank\textsuperscript{147}

Introduction: Capitalism, Leftism, Secularism, and the Indiana RFRA

In late March and early April of 2015, something extraordinary happened: Indiana, the small, flat state known mostly for agriculture, racecars, and strange time zones, was thrust into the national spotlight in the United States. At issue was the passage of a state law known as the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA).\textsuperscript{148} The principal aim of this law is to protect “persons” (including companies and firms) whose free exercise of religion has been “substantially burdened”. Similar RFRAs have been passed in 20 US states, and there also exists a RFRA in American federal law. Nevertheless, in Indiana, opponents of the RFRA almost immediately voiced their dissent. For some opponents, at issue was the designation of what counts as a “person” in the Indiana law. For most, however, the main problem with the law was that it might pave the way to legal discrimination against gays, lesbians, bisexuals, or trans-identifying individuals.

I am not primarily interested in what this law says, what its purported effects are or may be, or whether the law is, in the end, just or unjust. Rather, I am interested in the political battles and controversies enflamed by the law, and in particular, I am interested in the political alliances

\footnote{Milbank, Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason, 442.}
\footnote{Text of the Act is available online at https://iga.in.gov/legislative/2015/bills/senate/101#document-92bab197.}
forged through these battles and controversies. Then-governor Mike Pence of Indiana, who supported the RFRA, is a Republican. A major faction of the present Republican Party is conservative Christians who, in recent years, have rallied to the cause of “religious freedom,” as seen perhaps most (in)famously in the 2014 “Hobby Lobby” Supreme Court case (Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.). Because so many members of his own party support religious freedom, and because RFRAs are already littered throughout the United States at the federal and state levels, we might conclude with Patrick Deneen that “Pence no doubt thought he was practicing good politics: giving his base something they dearly wanted, while only potentially alienating committed members of the opposition party.”

In other words, opposition from liberal LGBTQ activists was to be expected. What was unexpected was the backlash from so many major corporations and other “big money” players – many of which, it must be said, form another major faction of the present Republican Party.

Nine CEOs from some of the largest firms in Indiana signed a letter protesting RFRA (representing Cummins Inc., Angie’s List, Anthem, Emmis Communications, Indiana University Health, Roche Diagnostics, Eli Lilly and Co., Dow AgroSciences, and Salesforce Marketing Cloud). Angie’s List, for its part, “canceled its proposal for a $40 million headquarters expansion that promised to bring 1,000 jobs to Indianapolis.” The NCAA and the Mid-American Conference both threatened not to hold future championship events in Indianapolis. Yelp and Gen Con both threatened not to conduct further business in Indiana. Apple CEO Tim Cook expressed his own frustration with Indiana’s RFRA (and Arkansas’s similar law), claiming via Twitter that

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151 Ibid.
“we strive to treat every customer the same”. Meanwhile, the band Wilco and comedians Nick Offerman and Megan Mullaly canceled upcoming shows in Indianapolis in order to protest RFRA.

The message from the great powers of capital to the state of Indiana, and to other states pondering similar RFRA-like laws, could not be clearer: do not enact any laws that might stigmatize any potential consumers. Do not threaten our interests. If you do, we will hurt you, we will take our money elsewhere, and we will not come back. In Indiana last year, we witnessed the unfolding of a narrative almost diametrically opposed to William Connolly’s “evangelical-capitalist resonance machine.” Here the interests of corporate America and conservative Christians did not align. They clashed bitterly. Meanwhile, there was no opposition whatsoever between corporate America and LGBTQ-friendly liberals. To the contrary, Apple, Anthem, and Angie’s List marched hand-in-hand with LGBTQ advocates against a now-weak governor and his conservative Christian supporters.

What is most noteworthy about the events surrounding the Indiana RFRA is that nothing about them is noteworthy. There was nothing at all unusual going on here. As Deneen points out, “[t]he decision by Apple, Walmart, Eli Lilly, Angie’s List, and so on was a business decision—even more, a marketing decision,” and, once we understand this, we should understand the more general truth on full display in the Indiana sage: “corporate America is willing to join any coalition that advances its financial interests and deeper philosophic commitments.”

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when he points to some sort of deep coalition, some sort of “resonance machine,” existing between capitalism and conservative Christianity. His is, I argue, a mistake in the identification of capitalist ideology. Once again Deneen, I believe, points us in a more fruitful direction, one upon which I will expand in the course of this essay: “Today’s corporate ideology has a strong affinity with the lifestyles of those who are defined by mobility, ethical flexibility, liberalism (whether economic or social), a consumerist mentality in which choice is paramount, and a ‘progressive’ outlook in which rapid change and ‘creative destruction’ are the only certainties.”¹⁵⁶ Leftist politics may today be a boon and not a hindrance to today’s “neoliberal” or “late” capitalism. I believe this is perhaps the most important message to take from the struggles surrounding Indiana’s RFRA.

The Argument of this Essay

I have opened this chapter with a discussion of the political struggles surrounding Indiana’s RFRA because I believe it serves as a valuable anecdote for my purposes. It shows not only that Leftist politics may today become allied with capitalism – while religious faith may occasionally find itself opposed to the latter, reversing .¹⁵⁷ I contend that it also illustrates the common matrix in which we today find liberalism, capitalism, and secularism. Indeed, that these three exist together in this common matrix is a central component of my argument – and Connolly, one of my principal interlocutors, already moves us in this direction when he notes the resonances of liberalism and secularism.¹⁵⁸ Milbank, my other principal interlocutor, will complete the triangle of relations by arguing that the logic of capitalism is also a secular logic (more on this below).

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 18.
¹⁵⁷ Right libertarianism is in my view also strongly allied with capitalism, but I consider this to be so obvious as to be worthy of note only here—in a note.
¹⁵⁸ William E. Connolly, Why I Am Not a Secularist (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 10.
In this chapter I shall make an argument about what it means to move “beyond secularism”. In order to do this, I adopt a method of comparing and contrasting two well-known critiques of secularism, that of Connolly and that of Milbank. I argue that Connolly’s critique of liberal secularism is itself another instance of liberal secularism. Meanwhile, Milbank helps us to recognize that the most radical criticism of secularism will always be a theological criticism. Throughout this essay, I make no effort to offer neutral commentary on these matters; indeed, I believe such neutrality, first, is always fictional and, second, is never in fact “neutral” but is rather a convenient veil for power. Perhaps in political theory this perspective is akin to Foucault, but I derive it mainly from Milbank and his Radically Orthodox understanding of Christian theology. Therefore, rather than writing as a politically and ethically neutral political theorist, I write instead always as a partisan of Christian socialism. I concur with Budgen, Kouvelakis, and Žižek that “the universal truth in a concrete situation can only be articulated from a thoroughly partisan position.”

I begin with an analysis and critique of Connolly. This critique has three parts to it, which are as follows.

First, I note a tension in Connolly’s book. While he rightly criticizes certain versions of Habermasian and Rawlsian liberalism which seek to exclude religious perspectives from the public sphere, Connolly’s thesis is itself manifestly secular. At times, I think Connolly somewhat clearly accepts his secularism, yet there are also moments when he seems to wish to move beyond secularism as a dominant paradigm. This latter desire is compromised because Connolly’s vision is, I argue, at all points a secular one, because even the politics of contestation which he favors

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159 Connolly, Why I Am Not a Secularist.
160 While all of his work might well be considered a critique of secularism, I shall focus mostly on Milbank, Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason.
itself takes place on a secular playing field. More broadly, this shortcoming of Connolly’s argument is a shortcoming common to any liberal argument: while the liberal ostensibly wishes for a kind of free contestation between competing perspectives of the good, this wish is itself compromised by matters of power. Connolly exhibits, then, a kind of bizarre blindness to power, a blindness to precisely the common liberal-capitalist-secular matrix I described briefly above. This blindness seems to me to severely undercut Connolly’s wish for a “deep pluralism,” in which secularism is but one perspective among many.

Second, I argue that Connolly’s vision of politics is properly a form of capitalist ideology. In other words, Connolly’s politics of contestation is the obverse of the economics of contestation in which we all live and to which we are all subject. If this is true, then far from mounting a challenge to capitalism (as he at times seems to desire), Connolly’s theory is entirely consistent with the logic of the latter. Further, if it is correct that there exists the aforementioned matrix of liberalism, capitalism, and secularism, then it follows that if Connolly is a friend to capitalism, then he is also a friend to secularism. Connolly’s vision is interestingly visionless in a way, concerned less with advancing a truth and more with preventing any particular vision from assuming the mantle of truth. Unfortunately and even tragically, such a theoretical vacuum is all-too-susceptible to be conquered, like all other spaces, by the logic of capitalism and, if my argument is correct, the logic of secularism as well. If this argument is correct, then far from not being a secularist, Connolly proves to be among the best of friends that secularism has.

Third, I turn more explicitly to Milbank in order to demonstrate that Connolly’s secularism, like all versions of secularism, is a) itself a product, in part, of its apparent nemesis, Christian theology, and b) wholly and entirely a construction, as opposed to the innocent result of the shearing-off of Christian “supernatural” beliefs. In Milbank, we find a theological alternative to
secular logics which, in the end, represents one possible means by which we may actually move beyond secularism.

I conclude with a call for a postliberal Christianity which may develop for itself a more thorough and powerful critique of secularism. Because secularism is nothing more than a story we tell ourselves, Christians may offer in turn an alternative story, one which does not accept the present terms of secular society but rather advances another vision entirely. The figure to whom we should turn today is not the “open theist” who dispenses entirely with the conceits of orthodoxy (a figure beloved by Connolly), but rather the passion and conviction of Saint Paul, a man who makes tremendous sacrifices for the sake of his truth. Here I turn to Badiou’s analysis of Paul’s fidelity to truth, and I offer this as an explicitly non-liberal alternative to Connolly. In my judgment, Badiou helps us to see that it is only a liberal political theory that presents a vision of “how political society” ought to work, which always involves some notion of how different particular visions might get along. The radical vision today, to the contrary, must press forth beyond this happy pronouncement of different perspectives getting along and present instead an entirely different message of universal address and scope. In the end, Paul’s vision is anything but secular, anything but pagan, yet it takes root from within a pagan world and opposes it in a most interesting manner.

What is Secularism?

Before beginning in earnest with my analysis and criticism of Connolly, I must address the basic definitional issue at hand: what is secularism? Above I have treated terms like “secularism,”

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“secularity,” and “secular logic” as one. Yet surely there is more than one secularism? Of course, I acknowledge fully that non-Western secularisms exist, but I also mean not to discuss these, for reasons of ignorance and scope. Within the West, I maintain that there is a recognizable liberal-capitalist-secular logic that has evolved and developed over the last several hundred years. However, even within Western culture, broadly speaking, are there not a plurality of secularisms, or a variety of secular conceptions? To be sure, but here I concur with Connolly: while there are obviously a variety of conceptions of secularism, “there is also a discernible hierarchy among them. The shape of that hierarchy may be governed by a general wish to provide an authoritative and self-sufficient public space equipped to regulate and limit ‘religious’ disputes in public life.”

While acknowledging the enormous contribution of Taylor to our understanding of secularism, particular when he discusses his third sense of secularity (with which Taylor is primarily interested), i must confess that here I am much less interested in precisely defining secularism (or secularity, or secular logic) than I am with what it might mean to oppose secularism. It is true, of course, that in opposing $x$, one has in mind some idea of what $x$ is. Nevertheless, for my purposes, the basic sense of secularism that Connolly proposes is adequate, I think. Further, both Taylor and Connolly helpfully provide a sense that the various definitions of secularism are intricately related. Taylor notes that his three sense of secularity (a secular public sphere, a decline in religious belief and practice, and, most importantly, the dramatic shift in the conditions of belief) overlap in important ways. Connolly, for his part, presents his conception of secularism as, in

163 Connolly, Why I Am Not a Secularist, 5. For Taylor, this conception would seem to fall under his first sense of secularity. See Taylor, A Secular Age (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1-3.
164 See Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3ff. Taylor usefully describes this third sense of secularity thusly: “This would focus on the conditions of belief. The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is un-challenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.” See ibid., 3.
165 Ibid.
fact, a hierarchy of conceptions. What is common to Taylor’s three senses of secularity, and to
Connolly’s conception of secularism, is that they all conceive of secularity or secularism in the
West as the fading-away of Christendom and the rise of something new in its place, something we
may call secular modernity. Importantly, this occurs both on the (macro) level of a massive shift
in the structure and logic of society and on the (micro) level of a change in how individuals within
Western society think and reason. These two levels of change cannot be easily and neatly
distinguished from one another. Instead, each feeds into the other as they develop in a manner I
am tempted to call dialectical.

Thus, secularism denotes neither simply a shift in societal structure nor simply a shift in
individual and group perspectives toward the sacred. Rather, secularism involves both of these
shifts, and they are bound up together. This conception, obviously much indebted to Taylor, allows
us to see that while there are obviously “believers” or “theists” alongside “secularists” or
“agnostics” or “atheists” in our society, it is also true that we may speak of a dominant paradigm
of secularism governing the field on which these differing perspectives mingle, relate, and
compete. This “dominant paradigm” is expressed in the United States, for instance, in terms of
both the separation of church and state and official state indifference toward matters of faith (e.g.,
unlike in France, in the US private citizens may express their chosen faith however they like in the
public sphere, and toward such expression, we typically believe the state ought to remain
indifferent or neutral).

In any case, this multifaceted conception of secularism, at once a perspective and a
dominant paradigm, will prove very important later, because I argue that Connolly too often seems
to ignore the latter sense.
Qualified Praise of Connolly

Connolly’s book is primarily an argument for the cultivation of “deep pluralism,” for the creation of an “ethos of engagement” between competing political and metaphysical perspectives, for the care for the “plurovocity of being,” and finally for the furtherance of “the politics of becoming.” Here I will sketch these four concepts and attempt to show how they fit together for Connolly. Next I will highlight how these concepts help Connolly paint a picture of a political public sphere that is, in my judgment, far superior to many rival secular liberal conceptions. Briefly put, Connolly’s liberalism does not seek simply to shun religious perspectives to the private realm, but it seeks instead to place religious perspectives in dialogue and contestation with secular perspectives. In this way, I believe Connolly’s liberalism is, in a sense, more liberal than those of Rawls and Habermas, both of whom Connolly criticize. After praising Connolly here, I will call attention to two shortcomings of Connolly in the following section.

Connolly’s “deep pluralism” is a more robust form of pluralism than that called for by many other political theorists. In a deep pluralist culture, “participants are called upon neither to leave their metaphysical baggage at home when they participate in various publics nor to adopt an overarching faith acknowledged by all parties who strive to promote the common good. Rather, a deep plurality of religious/metaphysical perspectives is incorporated into public discourses.”[^166]


[^167]: Ibid., 95.

Deep pluralism is also, in Connolly’s words, multidimensional pluralism, in the sense that such a pluralism would be constituted through the engagement “between multiple constituencies on the same territory honoring different moral sources.”[^167] Connolly here is explicitly targeting the Rawlsian conception of “public reason,” which, on Rawls’s theory, seems to govern public
discourse “when they engage in political advocacy in the public forum.” On Connolly’s view, Rawls is wrong even to suggest that metaphysical perspectives ought to be, as it were, left outside the door to the public forum.

With this deep and multidimensional pluralism, Connolly hopes to foster an “ethos of engagement.” There seem to be two requirements in order to foster an ethos of engagement. First, there must exist tolerance of deep pluralism. As Connolly states, “[t]olerance is an admirable virtue, even though a limited one.” We may conceive of tolerance, then, as a necessary but insufficient condition for the creation of an ethos of engagement. In addition to tolerating other views, Connolly suggests that “most would come to appreciate the profound element of contestability in the practice they do endorse. And they would incorporate that recognition positively into the way they engage other visions of public discourse in actual political life.” In other words, Connolly suggests that it is necessary to acknowledge the limits of one’s own metaphysical and/or political perspectives: none of them reflect perfectly the Truth, none reflect what is natural, or anything like this. None of them, in the end, are able to be asserted as the final vision that everyone must accept. This would seem to be the “I might be wrong” moment that is very dear to Connolly. Once atheists and theists, liberals and conservatives, admit that they might after all be mistaken, then perhaps they might be able to engage with one another without violence. Or, in other words, perhaps this possibility of being wrong might help at least to temper and assuage what Connolly elsewhere calls “the second problem of evil,” which “is the evil that flows from the attempt to establish security of identity for any individual or group by defining the other

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170 Ibid., 36.
that exposes sore spots in one’s identity as evil or irrational.”171 If instead of clinging to the always-elusive security of their own identities, Catholics, Muslims, atheists, Jews, Buddhists, and all the rest would instead recognize the profound contestability of their doctrines, then perhaps we may get along more peacefully and more vibrantly. Such is the hope latent in Connolly’s ethos of engagement.

Connolly is enamored with this vision of deep pluralism and a corresponding ethos of engagement, so much so that he claims that it is “[t]he most noble aspiration…to pursue an ethos of engagement among numerous constituencies in a world of deep, multidimensional pluralism.”172 This vision of the political public sphere does not come from nowhere. Instead, Connolly grounds it, or at least couples it, with a kind of metaphysics.173 This metaphysic can be expressed very simply: “Things are mobile at bottom, rather than still or fixed.”174 Or, put slightly differently, “there is an ineliminable element of mobility in things at bottom capable of upsetting the best-laid plans at unexpected junctures.”175 Connolly’s metaphysic of essential mobility or flux is, of course, a version of Deleuze’s notion of the “eternal return of difference,”176 and Connolly himself would doubtlessly acknowledge this.177 This appreciation of the essential difference or flux at the heart of being is what I take Connolly to mean when he refers to his “nontheistic faith

173 Connolly astutely points out that the term “metaphysics” is ambiguous. It signals “both that which is most fundamental to a perspective and that which goes beyond the physical, the sensible, or the realm of appearance.” This helps to explain the “academic mill” which regularly produces grandiose claims and accusations regarding metaphysics, or whether a thinker is ensnared in metaphysics, or whether a thinker has finally achieved a supposedly post-metaphysical perspective. Connolly helps to quiet this idle chatter. When I discuss “Connolly’s metaphysics,” I mean the term in the former sense, that is, in the sense of what is fundamental to his view. See ibid., 184.
174 Ibid., 53.
175 Ibid., 56–57.
in the plurovocity of being.” While Connolly accepts that this metaphysical or ontological perspective is, like all perspectives, contestable, I want to claim, again, that it serves to ground much of the rest of his theory. Perhaps, stepping back somewhat, it is obvious how these three components of Connolly’s vision—deep pluralism, an ethos of engagement, and care for the plurovocity of being—hang together. Each informs the other even while Connolly is clear that one may come to affirm the former elements while dismissing the third.

The fourth important concept that helps us to understand Connolly’s distinctive vision is the “politics of becoming.” He provides at least two different conceptualizations of the politics of becoming—indeed, if one accepts that there is mobility, difference, and flux at the heart of being, then it probably becomes essential to describe important concepts again and again in different ways in order to try to capture as much as possible in language while still acknowledging that the real necessarily eludes us. In a Connollian spirit, I will quote both descriptions in the hope that together they paint a broader picture than either alone:

The politics of becoming occurs when a culturally marked constituency, suffering under its negative constitution in an established institutional matrix, strives to reconfigure itself by moving the cultural constellation of identity/difference then in place. … By the politics of becoming I mean that paradoxical politics by which new cultural identities are formed out of unexpected energies and institutionally congealed injuries.

Paraphrasing, we might say the politics of becoming is simply the process whereby new politically-charged identities become or come to be in response to perceived injuries on the part of some social

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178 Ibid., 8.
179 See ibid., 53.
180 Such a method, incidentally, seems to me to have much in common with the problem of talking about the biblical God. Such a God is at once known and unknown, describable yet elusive, named and yet beyond every name. Of course, this is just the paradox that Saint Augustine captures so beautifully in the first few pages of his Confessions. It is also one reason to pursue apophatic or negative theology. Finally, it bears distinctive similarities to Rorty’s later thought. See Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), chap. 1.
181 Connolly, Why I Am Not a Secularist, 51, 57.
or political group. Once, for example, there was no such thing as an “intersex” identity, yet this identity became as that group of individuals who would to come to assume that identity perceived the profound injustice of the identity that had previously been bestowed upon them, namely “hermaphrodites”. Indeed, more broadly one might perceive LGBTQXYZ politics as an exemplary case of the politics of becoming. The (post)modern phenomenon of identity politics seems to me to be precisely what Connolly has in mind here. The justification for this politics is plain from what has been said: if things are mobile at bottom, if all perspectives are contestable, if we value deep pluralism, then identity politics is, at the very least, one of the most obvious political outcomes (to say absolutely nothing about whether there might be others), because identity politics proceeds from a critical questioning of the stability of any identity.

What does all of this have to do with secularism? Connolly’s vision augments and improves upon Habermasian and Rawlsian conceptions of secular liberalism in at least four important ways.

First, Connolly at no point presumes to speak from a neutral perspective—contrarily, he is at pains to point out over and over again that his too is a contestable perspective.

Second, very refreshingly, Connolly does not strive for a “post-metaphysical” perspective. Indeed, he is admirably wary of just how fashionable “post-metaphysical” perspectives have become in the academy. Connolly not only openly employs a metaphysical perspective of his own, as I discussed above. I think he is also clear that it is impossible or nearly impossible to purge metaphysical perspectives from political life (including from political theory). As he points out, those liberals who aim for a neutral, flat, non-metaphysical conception of the public sphere crucially ignore what he terms the “visceral register of intersubjectivity,” which includes such “prerepresentational sites of appraisal” as instincts, moods, and affects. Such visceral intensities

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are a focal point not only of (especially Christian) theologies of embodiedness but also of the much more “secular” and academic phenomenon of affect theory. Yet too often secular liberalism (along with, I would add, more legalistic theologies) neither account for nor include the visceral register in their analyses. Here Connolly’s contribution is enormously significant, and he merits considerable praise.

Third, following from the last point, this attention to the visceral, to the metaphysical, and to the ontological yields an immensely more varied, vibrant, and even exciting public sphere. In Connolly’s rendition of secular liberalism, no longer do persons religious need to practice the “metaphysical abstinence” called for on some renditions of Habermasian and Rawlsian accounts. To the contrary, individuals of all metaphysical and religious stripes may associate freely in the public sphere without wearing a neutralizing mask of public reason—provided, of course, such individuals first accept the contestability of their own positions and, second, pursue an ethos of engagement with those different from themselves. Nevertheless, what we see in Connolly is a vision of the public sphere more pluralist than most pluralists and more liberal than most liberals, to such an extent that I am tempted to call Connolly’s an ultra-liberal secularism. Of course, as Connolly concedes, even his ideal political public sphere “would produce a set of limits and exclusions.”

This is, to me, hardly significant. There is no conceivable human society that is absolutely free from exclusion, and, furthermore, the society which in my view comes closest to this ideal, if it is an ideal, is the church.

Fourth and finally, Connolly does not fall prey, in my judgment, to anything like a subtraction story in order to explain secularism. I take the notion of “subtraction stories” from Taylor, who explains that these are “stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular,

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183 Ibid., 37.
184 Ibid., 96.
which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge.”¹⁸⁵ Connolly never comes close to asserting that secularism amounts to a revelation of some quintessentially human essence that was always already there. Once again, in this fourth way Connolly’s account proves to be highly sophisticated and valuable.

As I have hopefully made clear in this section, the successes of Connolly’s book are numerous. Nevertheless, below I criticize Connolly’s theory in two distinct ways. First, I point out what I see as a tension in Connolly’s theory between his desire for secularism to be at once one perspective among many and yet also a governing logic of liberal society. Second, and perhaps more fatally for Connolly’s theory, I consider it as an instance of capitalist ideology.

**Two Criticisms of Connolly**

If one is an adherent of liberalism, secularism, and capitalism, then one finds no greater friend than William Connolly. Indeed, for such an adherent, I doubt the criticisms I shall offer below will prove even remotely persuasive. However, my hope is that if one is skeptical of the dominant liberal-secular-capitalist matrix in Western society then perhaps my criticisms might resonate a little more.

In an important way, the title of Connolly’s book is misleading. The reader picks up the book expecting to be told why Connolly is not a secularist. However, this expectation is thwarted precisely because Connolly rather clearly is a secularist, but a secularist of a different sort than Habermas and Rawls. There is, I think, a tension in Connolly’s book. I think he wants to have it

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both ways: he wants secularism to be one perspective among many, yet he also wants the field on
which contestation takes place to be itself secular. Let us consider first a pair of quotations which
stand, in my mind, in contrast to one another, at least in inflection if not in substance. First
Connolly says that “the aim is not to eliminate secularism but to convert it into one perspective
among several in a pluralistic culture.”

186 This is his familiar, happy story: a thousand different competing parties clash on ten thousand issues, and, thanks to an ethos of engagement, we all learn from one another and, thanks to our recognition of the contestability of our beliefs, we get along without bloodshed, or at least without much. It is this vision that I had in mind above when I suggested that Connolly’s vision is interestingly visionless in a way. He is much less concerned with his own partisan view than he is with preventing the hegemony of any single view. Consider now two later re-descriptions of the aim of his text. Now speaking of secularism as a modus vivendi, Connolly declares that “[s]ecularism needs refashioning, not elimination.”

187 Later, along these same lines, Connolly suggests that it is necessary to “rework secular liberalism.”

188 Is this refashioning or reworking just what is implied earlier, when the stated aim was to make secularism one perspective among many?

My suspicion is that there is some conceptual slippage going on here. More precisely, I suspect that in fact Connolly means to say one thing when he talks about secularism as a “perspective” in the first quotation, and he means to say another thing when he speaks of refashioning secularism and reworking secular liberalism in the second and third quotations. The ambiguity is inherent to the manner in which Connolly discusses secularism throughout the book.

186 Connolly, Why I Am Not a Secularist, 11.
187 Ibid., 19.
188 Ibid., 73.
In some places, secularism is indeed just a perspective: it is a *point of view* regarding the proper place of religious sentiment, or even a point of view regarding the truth or untruth, the sense or nonsense, of religion generally and, in the West, Christianity in particular. In this sense, to encounter secularism one might simply go to one’s local Barnes and Noble and peruse the shelf or shelves devoted to the latest manifestos on atheism or agnosticism. Or perhaps one can go online in order to persuade oneself that, in fact, this Jesus character is completely made up. Correspondingly, in order to encounter religion as a point of view one might simply immerse oneself in the library of Joel Osteen self-help books (in order, of course, to learn that God actually wants you to become rich). Various points of view are, naturally, as scattered, diverse, and ubiquitous as the vast array of commodities to which we are privy.

However, in other places, Connolly seems to recognize secularism as indeed a *modus vivendi*, an entire way of life. Within any way of life, naturally, multiple perspectives arise, whether freely or otherwise. Nevertheless, precisely because some “perspectives” are embodied in an entire way of life, they are dominant. A way of life produces its own cultural logics, its own spirit, which is then reflected in codes of laws, in the shape of the public sphere (indeed, in the very structure of the demarcation of the private and the public), even in the development of norms, mores, and customs. To put the matter in terms which I have employed above, the way of life might be described metaphorically as the field upon which various perspectives relate and compete. Christendom, for instance, was one such way of life. Perspectives we might today recognize as secular might well have been found, yet the dominant logic of the age was a recognizable extension of the reality which was Christendom.189

189 Of course, in this analysis my debt to both Taylor and Milbank is likely obvious.
I contend that I must clearly explicate this ambiguity in the term “secularism” because Connolly too easily slips from one meaning to the other. It is probably fair to say that the bulk of his book concerns the first meaning, secularism as a perspective. Consider, however, that Connolly also makes a very strange kind of peace with his usual sparring partners, Habermas and Rawls: “[t]he Rawlsian and Habermasian strategies to secularize the nation do not seem entirely wrong to me.” The ways in which these two strategies encounter limitations are made obvious in the text, but Connolly is frustratingly silent about how and to what extent they are correct. I speculate that Connolly means they are correct just insofar as both try to limit ecclesiastical reach and power. Consider further Connolly’s statement regarding the usual secular policy of containment: “the secular wish to contain religious and irreligious passions within private life helps to engender the immodest conceptions of public life peddled by so many secularists. The need today is to cultivate a public ethos of engagement in which a wider variety of perspectives than heretofore acknowledged inform and restrain one another.” The very interesting thing about this passage is that Connolly agrees with the classic liberal desire to constrain or restrain passions, but he pursues a different, more pluralistic means of arriving at this goal. We ought, then, to restrain passion, but to what end? The end in question would seem to be a well-functioning secular liberal society.

It is in this way that I claim Connolly is bizarrely blind to power. While he seems to be aware that the field upon which contestation between rival perspectives takes place is obviously tilted in favor of some perspectives over others, he does not, in my judgment, recognize adequately that the field itself is secular. He does not, in other words, mind well enough the manner in which

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190 Connolly, Why I Am Not a Secularist, 91.
191 Ibid., 5.
192 For a clear restatement of this aim, see Stephen Holmes, Passions and Constraint: On the Theory of Liberal Democracy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). The similarities of Holmes and Connolly are noteworthy.
he slides subtly and easily from a conception of secularism as “one perspective among others” and a conception of secularism as a way of life, within which other ways of being must find their place.

As a second criticism of Connolly, I want to consider his argument as an instance of capitalist ideology. By this I mean that Connolly’s ideal vision of politics is a reflection of capitalism. If I am correct that we may speak of a liberal-secular-capitalist matrix (and corresponding dominant logic in Western society), then it would follow that insofar as Connolly’s theory reflects and does not reject capitalism, then his theory likewise reflects and does not reject secularism. Is there justification for speaking of such a matrix? I think there is, because if one doubts its existence, then one must somehow otherwise account for the remarkable historical coincidence of the rise of liberalism, secularism, and capitalism. As I noted above, Connolly seems to accept that liberalism and secularism are two sides of the same coin. In adding capitalism to this matrix, I hope I am, first, reasonably assessing historical phenomena that are otherwise difficult to explain and, second, following closely the thinking of Milbank, who suggests that “capitalist logic…is, precisely, a secular logic.”

Rawls’s musings on the possibility of a liberal socialism notwithstanding, I believe it is clear that heretofore in the West liberalism, secularism, and capitalism have proceeded together. There is no need here fully to broach the old Marxist issue of totality, but I think I am pushing toward something like that.

How might Connolly’s theory be an instance of capitalist ideology?

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193 Milbank, Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason, 196.
195 The Marxist conception of capitalism as totality should not be confused with a conception of capitalism as utterly and inescapably determining all of thought. I would call the latter totalitarian, and it should be rejected for the most mundane of reasons: anti-capitalist thought is, after all, possible. It remains the case, however, that even free thought has the nasty habit of unwittingly mirroring the logic of capital. One task of theory today, perhaps, is to point out and criticize such tendencies, at least in Leftist theory, wherever they may arise. Regarding this task of criticism, I would agree with Marx that it must be ruthless.
First, we should call attention once more to Connolly’s insistence on the profound contestability of all political and metaphysical doctrines. The issue is not simply that he conceives of these as contestable. Conceived broadly, who would dare argue the opposite? Rather, the issue is that Connolly seems, in my view, to stress the contestability of all positions at the expense of asserting and arguing for a truth of his own. Thus, rather than proposing a new truth (or an old one) for philosophical discussion, Connolly’s theory leaves me at times with a vision of politics as akin to a shopping mall. Each party beckons for attention, for consumers, competing with other parties for the spotlight. It is difficult, at least for me, to shake off the idea that the ascendancy of the notion of endless contestation—and the celebration of contestation—in politics has more than a little to do with the reality of endless contestation in our lives as producers and consumers.

Perhaps, however, this is only a personal shortcoming. We might then consider Connolly’s discussion of the politics of becoming as another manifestation of an underlying capitalist ideology. I sought to illustrate above that the politics of becoming has to do principally with the coming-to-be of new identities in response to perceived injuries. This is, I suggested, one particular model of identity politics, or a politics concerned principally with the construction of more and more identities and relations between identities. Certainly on the left today identity politics has attained a certain place of privilege, both inside and outside the academy. Yet the identity politics which Connolly seems to cherish can itself be understood as a product of capitalism. To make this point, I quote Badiou at length:

…each identification (the creation or cobbling together of identity) creates a figure that provides a material for its investment by the market…What inexhaustible potential for mercantile investments in this upsurge—taking the form of communities demanding recognition and so-called cultural singularities—of women, homosexuals, the disabled, Arabs! And these infinite combinations of predicative traits, what a godsend! Black homosexuals, disabled Serbs, Catholic

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196 It is worth asking in a footnote: who are these arrogant monsters in the history of political thought who have the audacity to declare seriously that their thought is “beyond” contestation? I have never found them.
pedophiles, moderate Muslims, married priests, ecologist yuppies, the submissive unemployed, prematurely aged youth! Each time, a social image authorizes new products, specialized magazines, improved shopping malls, “free” radio stations, targeted advertising networks, and finally, heady “public debates” at peak viewing times…Capital demands a permanent creation of subjective and territorial identities in order for its principle of movement to homogenize its space of action; identities, moreover, that never demand anything but the right to be exposed in the same way as others to the uniform prerogatives of the market. The capitalist logic of the general equivalent and the identitarian and cultural logic of communities or minorities form an articulated whole.\textsuperscript{197}

What can we conclude from Badiou’s sharp vitriol directed at identity politics? Should we oppose these blossoming identities? Should we become prejudiced hate-mongers in order somehow to combat capitalism? To conclude thusly is to miss the import of Badiou’s argument. It is not that we should somehow oppose all of these “socially constructed” identities and aim instead for something more “natural”. Instead, we ought to recognize a simple but disconcerting truth: commendable though much of it doubtlessly is, the politics of identity is part and parcel of the logic of capitalism. Therefore, the causes of identity politics can never prove to be a launching pad for criticisms of capitalism. The truth(s) that must come to be, if we hope to abolish capitalism, must itself be \textit{indifferent to differences}. Far from being trampled, for Badiou a truth must \textit{traverse} them in order to become what it might be.\textsuperscript{198}

Indeed, the extent to which the politics of identity is at one with the logic of capitalism may be glimpsed in the anecdote with which I began this essay. To reiterate, it was no accident that LGBT-friendly activists found themselves in alliance with many of the great powers of contemporary American capitalism. Nothing was awry in Indiana in 2015 (except the Republican Party). Rather, the wheels of capitalism were churning with their usual proficiency.

\textsuperscript{197} Badiou, \textit{Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism}, 10–11.
\textsuperscript{198} See ibid., chap. 10. I will return to this theme in the conclusion below.
In one final way Connolly’s theory may be seen as capitalist ideology. Here I am concerned with Connolly’s Deleuzean metaphysic, viz. the claim that “things are mobile at bottom, rather than still or fixed.” Connolly’s metaphysic asserts the priority of difference and, as I noted above, this serves to ground much of his broader political theory. In order to criticize this metaphysic, I turn once more to Badiou. He reminds us, first, that “[i]nfinite alterity is quite simply what there is.” Furthermore, “since differences are what there is, and since every truth is the coming-to-be of that which is not yet, so differences are then precisely what truths depose, or render insignificant.” However, here a rejoinder seems possible: has not Connolly declared already that in his politics of becoming, identities come-to-be? Have I not described that concept thusly? Yet Badiou maintains that identity politics “is organically without truth.” We may ask somewhat playfully: what justifies such an exclusionary conception? The justification stems, I think, from the fact that identity politics highlights, in the end, nothing more than what there is, namely difference. For Badiou, a truth, meanwhile, seeks to articulate something that transcends differences, something to which difference is rendered irrelevant. Perhaps it is unsurprising that among the paradigmatic figures of truth for Badiou we find both Saint Paul and Lenin.

Difference, plurality, multiplicity, becoming, alterity—more, more, and more—this is the language capitalism speaks today. This is why Žižek describes Deleuze as the “ideologist of late capitalism.” His ontology or metaphysics happens to describe perfectly the day-to-day realities of our time.

200 Ibid., 27.
If the charge is that Connolly’s theory is capitalist ideology, then what are we to make of his concern for “economic inclusion,” and his insistence that the latter is bound up with his pluralist politics? I think the notion of “economic inclusion” actually fits perfectly with Badiou’s claim that the desire of the politics of identity is to be exposed in the same way as all others to the vicissitudes of the market. Connolly probably has in mind some sort of redistributive scheme, and he probably means that such a scheme is necessary for a truly vibrant pluralism. This is a noble view, and I would least of all oppose redistribution, but this bandage does not negate the underlying open wound. I contend that it remains the case that Connolly’s theory is dramatically in-step with the logic of capitalism. What this means is that in order both to criticize capitalism coherently and to imagine a socialist alternative, we require a theory that preserves the best insights of Connolly while emerging as something completely different.

To conclude this section, I want to call attention to one final quotation that illustrates well my profound differences with Connolly. He argues that in the United States, “entrenched codes of morality and normality weigh in heavily on the side of being, stasis, and stability without even acknowledging that the scales are tipped that way.” In response, I ask how such a vision can be maintained in a world where new identities arise constantly, where the satisfaction of sexual pleasure becomes ever closer to a moral injunction, where the very notions of pensions and labor unions have long since ceased to have a place, where precarity is the new defining quality of productive life, where public and private blend to such an extent that we wonder whether either still exists, where the free flow of money and commodities awaits always to satisfy every possible craving? How can the presumed bias toward stasis and stability persist when “all that is solid melts

203 See Connolly, Why I Am Not a Secularist, 186.
204 Ibid., 57.
into air” and “everything holy is profaned”? In my view it cannot. In my view capitalism, and along with it liberalism and secularism, defines the dominant logic of our age.

I have argued that Connolly is wrong to claim he is not a secularist. Instead, I have argued that he is a wonderful theorist of secularism, capitalism, and liberalism, which together form a matrix that is, at least in the West today, inextricable. Now I will consider another critique of secularism, this one from John Milbank. Unlike Connolly, Milbank criticizes secularism from an explicitly theological perspective. I will argue that this perspective succeeds in opening up the possibility of a truly post-secular, post-liberal, and post-capitalist politics.  

**Milbank’s Critique of Secularism**

Here I shall sketch Milbank’s theological critique of secularism. It is, in broad terms, an account of the constitution of “the secular” as a field of pure human will or power. I will conclude the section by suggesting that the criticism is immensely politically significant.

For John Milbank, secularism is nothing more than a story we tell ourselves, and it is, furthermore, paradoxically a kind of Christian story. It is not just that secularism evolves out of Christendom. This is obvious simply from historical chronology, and Connolly along with everyone else with open eyes recognizes this. Milbank’s claim is stronger: modern secularism as we know it is itself the perverse result of heterodox Christian theology. In other words, according to Milbank, “secular discourse…is actually constituted in its secularity by ‘heresy’ in relation to orthodox Christianity, or else a rejection of Christianity that is more ‘neo-pagan’ than simply anti-
religious.” The typical script is entirely flipped. Like Taylor, Milbank stands athwart all subtraction stories: “Once, there was no ‘secular’. And the secular was not latent, waiting to fill more space with the steam of the ‘fully human’, when the pressure of the sacred was relaxed.”

The secular was not “already there.” Nor is it natural. Rather, “the space of the secular had to be invented as the space of pure power.” As we shall see, what this means is that the space of the secular is a space dominated by the will and by the competition of wills. This construction is based on a particular anthropology, and this anthropology, in turn, is based on a heterodox Christian theology which Milbank claims took hold especially with the work of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. This new account of “the secular” becomes, Milbank suggests, the site for a new politics.

Milbank tells us a story, an alternative narrative, of the dramatic alteration of the understanding of space, property, and dominion which lies at the heart of his account of the rise of the secular. Consider first the notion of dominium or ownership. With this notion, the crucial matter is what it is proper to do with one’s own, or, alternatively, what constraints properly apply to the use of that which belongs to one. Formerly, Milbank suggests, dominium was governed by or situated within a larger story about ethical limits to the use of that which one owns or, perhaps most interestingly, a story about God’s providence and one’s participation therein. Slowly divine or human limits to the use of that which one owns began to disappear and, in the late Middle Ages, dominium became “redefined as power, property, active right, and absolute sovereignty.”

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207 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 3.
208 Ibid., 9.
209 Ibid., 13.
210 Ibid., 13–14.
211 Ibid., 13.
In other words, there arose a new individualist, voluntarist kind of anthropology, an entire sphere of society conceived entirely as power.

Upon this anthropology, Milbank argues, there rose an entirely new science of politics. Thus, “[t]he political state, for the nominalist Hobbes, is only conceivable as an ‘Artificial Man’ (Leviathan) whose identity and reality are secured by an unrestricted right to preserve and control his own artificial body.” More generally, in order “to keep notions of the State free from any suggestions of a collective essence or generally recognized telos, it must be constructed on the individualist model of dominium.” Milbank concludes, then, “that ‘unrestricted’ private property, ‘absolute sovereignty’ and ‘active rights’, which compose the ‘pure-power’ object of the new politics, are all the emanation of a new anthropology which begins with human persons as individuals and yet defines their individuality essentialistically, as ‘will’, or ‘capacity’, or as ‘impulse to self-preservation’.” In other words, the story Milbank wants to tell us is a story about the ascension of the idea of pure willing, pure volition, or pure power. From the level of the individual, where the latter may do anything at all with her property, the same notion is transferred to the state, retaining an older idea of the community as a political or social body. The suggestion is that if the state is, in fact, an artificial person, then it is endowed likewise with the same unlimited right to do what it likes with what belongs to it. Here there is, Milbank suggests, a common origin to absolutism and liberalism: “It is in this inescapable imperative of nominalism-voluntarism that one discovers the kinship at root of modern absolutism with modern liberalism. The same notion of dominium promotes both Hobbes’s dictum that the sovereign power can never bind itself, and his view that the greatest liberty of subjects depends on the silence of the law.”

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212 Ibid., 14.  
213 Ibid.  
214 Ibid., 14–15.  
215 Ibid., 14.
matters somewhat, we might say that both absolutism and liberalism are premised on the priority of the will. Within one’s proper sphere, once again, one may do whatever one likes. All that then needs to be debated is the relative extent of one’s (or the state’s) sphere. While today absolutism has perhaps fallen on hard times, the notion that private property acquisition must proceed without limits is an idea that powerfully animates the politics of late capitalism.

Thus far Milbank suggests only that the secular came gradually to be seen as a realm of pure power in which the only possible limits develop from a battle of different wills. His distinctive contribution, I think, is to claim that this phenomenon is, at root, theological. More specifically, it originates from a heterodox version of Christianity. Here I quote Milbank at length:

how did this anthropology ever secure legitimacy in a theological and metaphysical era? The answer is that it was theologically promoted. Dominium, as power, could only become the human essence because it was seen as reflecting the divine essence, a radical divine simplicity without even formal differentiation, in which, most commonly, a proposing ‘will’ is taken to stand for the substantial identity of will, essence, and understanding….In two ways, therefore, theology helped to determine the new anthropology and the new ‘science’ of politics. First of all, it ensured that men (sic), when enjoying unrestricted, unimpeded property rights and even more when exercising the rights of a sovereignty that ‘cannot bind itself’, come closest to the imago dei. Secondly, by abandoning participation in divine Being and Unity for a ‘covenantal bond’ between God and men, it provided a model for human interrelationships as ‘contractual’ ones. It is not an accident that in Molina, the sixteenth-century Spanish Jesuit theologian, an identification of dominium with ius goes along with the idea that there is an area of ‘sheer’ human freedom in response to grace, whereas for Thomism even our freedom is mysteriously determined by God, without ceasing to be freedom. Hence it can be seen how theology stakes out factum as an area of human autonomy, by making dominium into a matter of absolute sovereignty and absolute ownership. This is the space in which there can be a ‘secular’, or secular knowledge of the secular – and it is just as fictional as all other human topographies.”

In other words, the new, voluntarist secular realm of “pure power” was, Milbank claims, theologically justified by a voluntarist theology. The old God which was paradoxically limited in its limitlessness—for example, by God’s goodness—was replaced by a God conceived as pure

216 Ibid., 16.
will. Such a God might just as well will evil as good. Milbank suggests that with this new voluntarist theology, a new conception of the *imago dei* emerged. Humanity was still conceived in the image of God, to be sure, but now God himself was nothing but will. So too, humans and human societies became, in due course, nothing but manifestations of will. Furthermore, following Duns Scotus, being comes to be conceived univocally, such that God differs from his creation not in kind but only in degree. 217 “Participation” in such a God is then impossible. Rather, an idolatrous vision of God as rival to his own creation comes to the fore, such that, as Milbank suggests, the relation between God and humanity came to be seen as a model for human contracts. The only augmentation to this scheme today is that God himself has been negated from this already secular framework. A field already defined by autonomous will has become simply more autonomous.

What are the advantages of Milbank’s alternative narrative of the rise of the *modus vivendi* of secularism?

First, the usual story is turned on its head: no longer is theology or religion a kind of alien being with respect to the “purely human” realm of the secular. Instead, we may reconceive of secularism, and all the developments that arise along with it, as themselves religions which either exist as parodies of Christianity or else define themselves against the latter. This represents an end to all dreams of a neutral secular realm, of neutral secular reason, or of neutral secular science. All secular theory is, instead, simply “another mythos”218 or “an alternative confession.”219

Second, Milbank’s account should make us a little more wary of certain forms of Leftist politics. Milbank notes that for Marx, “the utopian phase, which Marx envisages as inevitably supervening upon the collapse of capitalism, is conceived primarily in terms of the unleashing of

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217 Ibid., xxiv.
218 Ibid., 2.
The idea that the problem with liberalism or capitalism is that it stunts, restricts, or limits human freedom is itself bound up with the heterodox theology which helped to pave the way for liberalism and capitalism. It therefore proves necessary even to reconsider the notion of “emancipatory politics” as a kind of description of the aim of radical politics. As Milbank suggests, “[t]o say ‘emancipate’ is only to say maximize negative freedom of choice,” and it is far from clear that that will result in socialism rather than hyperindividualism and nihilism.

Third, Milbank’s theory forces Christians to reconceive how to epistemologically justify the faith. For if Milbank is correct, then it is impossible to adopt the typical method of apologetics, that is, to begin with neutral secular reason and proceed via argument to certain Christian truths, for instance, to the existence of an omnipotent God, or whatever. Indeed, the very interesting result of Milbank’s theory is that, as we began to see already in chapter one, Christianity can no longer be justified in any terms but its own. Thus, for instance, Milbank says that “if my Christian perspective is persuasive, then this should be a persuasion intrinsic to the Christian logos itself, not the apologetic mediation of a supposedly neutral human reason.” Later, Milbank makes much the same claim in a way which might better illustrate the epistemological consequences of his theory. In discussing the possible theoretical or epistemological justification for the doctrine of the Incarnation, Milbank argues that “[t]he only possible additional justification must come from the inherent attractiveness of the picture of God thence provided: no other picture, save of incarnation in a joyful and suffering life in time, gives quite such an acute notion of divine love,

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220 Milbank, Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason, 177.
221 It is probably impossible here to come to a precise statement about causality. Perhaps the most we can say is that it seems clear that voluntarist theology justified liberalism and capitalism in a way that orthodox theology could not. In other words, we might point out simply that the theology Milbank attacks certainly parallels these political and economic phenomena.
222 Milbank, Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason, 275.
223 Ibid., 1.
and involvement in our destiny.” The only defense of the Christian God is the inherent attractiveness of this vision. Nothing else will do. It is for this reason that, when discussing Alasdair MacIntyre, Milbank suggests that “MacIntyre, of course, wants to argue against this stoic-liberal-nihilist tendency, which is ‘secular reason’. But my case is rather that it is only a mythos, and therefore cannot be refuted, but only out-narrated, if we can persuade people – for reasons of ‘literary taste’ – that Christianity offers a much better story.” Should the absence of any neutral justification for the faith fill Christians with fear? If they lack faith, then of course it should, because there is, in the end, no way to prove its truth. Milbank’s suggestion here is remarkably similar to Robert Barron’s notion of “the epistemic priority of Christ”: “we don’t read Jesus through the lens of a predetermined epistemology, but rather…we understand the nature of knowledge in general through those narratives.” For the Christian, as for all, there is no other place to begin but from one’s tradition, from one’s holy book(s), from one’s scripture. We must then simply ask honestly whether the picture we find there is the best account of the world we can find, and we must openly accept that not all will agree. But this is no cause for alarm: after all, disagreement over fundamentals is, as Badiou helps us to see, simply what there is. We must press forth regardless.

**Conclusion: Saint Paul and a Christian Politics of Truth**

If we follow Milbank and oppose secularism as itself another religion, if we seek rather a post-secular politics, how might this look? Am I calling for a theocracy? Am I attempting to

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224 Ibid., 386.
225 Ibid., 331.
impose one comprehensive doctrine on all others? Am I waxing nostalgic for Christendom? I wish to answer all of these questions negatively. Indeed, I want to claim that a radical Christian politics cannot take the form today of imagining a new “Christianized” public sphere. Indeed, it cannot even take the form of recommending casually a new way for different factions to relate to one another. Instead, I take difference as a given and proceed from there. Instead, I do not seek to formulate some new public sphere from above, as it were, but I seek rather to articulate a thoroughly partisan position and to advance from this situation. I offer not a “theory of society” but an explicitly Christian vision for the church. However, even this vision is compromised by the exceedingly reactionary character of so much of the church today. Indeed, when I consider my comrades—my brothers and sisters—I turn not only to fellow Catholics and Christians but equally to anarchists, communists, and socialists, all of whom seek not simply for a new way for different identities to relate within liberal-secular-capitalism but seek, in fact, an entirely new constellation. In such an endeavor we are in a dark forest, especially after the legacy of Marxism, and the way forward is unclear. To such friends I offer Radical Orthodoxy as one way forward, though I am not pretentious enough to assume it is the only one. For Christian socialists, my argument is simply that we should work from within our tradition, faithful as we are that it is true.

Fortunately, in this difficult work there is a figure to whom we may look as a model and inspiration, and he is not over the hills and far away but known to us all. This is Saint Paul.

I concur with Badiou (and Karl Barth, incidentally) that Paul is in important respects not a distant figure of a bygone age but is instead our contemporary. For Badiou, this primarily “consists in subtracting truth from the communitarian grasp, be it that of a people, a city, an empire, a territory, or a social class.”227 In other words, Paul’s truth—that Jesus Christ has risen—is not

deduced from any community sense or system of customs. It is rather the case that Paul literally brings this truth to a variety of communities. For me, Paul is our contemporary in this way but also in others. As Paul lived under the governance of a pagan empire, emerging from a Jewish community, and from the legacy of Greek thought, so we Christians live today under the governance of a secular liberal empire, emerging from a Christian community, and from the legacy of European thought. As Paul lived before Christendom, so we see and smell everywhere its putrefying corpse. Therefore I claim that once we refrain from viewing Paul only as a historical datum and read him once more with fresh eyes, keen to the remarkable similarities between Paul’s situation and ours, then there is much to learn from him. To conclude I will simply suggest three ways in which Paul’s situation suggests avenues for thought and practice today.

First, Paul is utterly indifferent toward differences. He does not seek to stamp them out. To the contrary, when considering matters of custom, Paul dispenses practical advice only in the furtherance of the fragile new church. He goes so far as to write that “some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds.”228 What matters is not that different communities have different customs. What matters to Paul is that Christ was crucified on Friday and rose again on Sunday. As Paul says, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”229 Therefore let us today seek not to stamp out difference as a matter of principle. Let us seek instead not to argue about opinions230 and pursue instead the truth and the new creation. Opinions are trifling matters; they “must be traversed in order for universality itself

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228 Romans 14:5.
230 See Romans 14:1.
to be constructed.” Traverse them and respect them we must, not as an end in itself but for the sake of truth.

Paul preached for the church but he also took positions on occasion in opposition to other members of the church. In the incident at Antioch, we see that Paul “opposed [Peter] to his face” after Peter succumbs to the pro-circumcision faction in the early church. When speaking to any who act or preach inconsistently with the gospel, Paul tells us that he “did not submit to them even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you.” The point I wish to make here is not about the need for purges or purity. It is rather that, though it is true that the church is not a debate society, we desperately need today new “incidents at Antioch,” new, passionate disputes concerning the meaning and implications of the gospel. To put the matter bluntly, too often the church passively makes peace with Caesar and Mammon when the point is to oppose both openly.

Paul considered himself the apostle to the gentiles. This is because, importantly, the church is not meant to be a kind of exclusionary society divorced from the world. Nor is Christianity a religion of the hereafter alone—or else, if it is, then Nietzsche is right to declare it the source of European nihilism. Rather, Christianity is, in essence, profoundly worldly. Paul writes always as though all of human history has been shattered in half by the Christ event, and so it has! We are, I argue, impelled not to avoid those we deem unclean or insufficiently righteous but rather truly to traverse the differences we see around us. In this way the task for radical Christians is a political task; like Paul, we must “become all things to all men” for the sake of the gospel. I had something like this in mind when I suggested above that I find as much (or even more) camaraderie

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232 Galatians 2:11.
233 Galatians 2:5.
234 1 Corinthians 9:22.
with political radicals as I do with many Christians. In this way perhaps we may conceive of Christianity not as an accomplished fact but as a revolutionary task.

What is to be done, then? Today Christians should utterly ignore the dictates, the customs, the governance, the will, the rule, the always-fictional neutrality of secularism. Instead, we should look to our own traditions, to our own customs, to our own sacred texts, and theorize from these. Too long we have sought to accommodate our beliefs in a kind of polite engagement with secularism—in which, of course, the primacy of secularism is implicitly supposed. We have swallowed whole the lie of its neutrality. Indeed, even the logical structure of apologetics itself presupposes a priority of engagement with neutral secular reason in order to show the “rationality” or the “reasonableness” of Christianity. Thus, I reject apologetics. I reject too the Enlightenment quest to demonstrate that Christianity is one species, one particular manifestation, of a broader “natural” religion. This order is backwards. We should begin with Christianity, we should seek more deeply to understand it, and we should recognize, crucially, the always-looming threat of idolatry. In Paul’s journeys, he came to understand that “Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.”

May this passage serve as a guide for a revolutionary Christian socialism.

In the next chapter I continue along the same theme I have pursued in chapters one and two, namely of arguing against radical democratic theory and for Radical Orthodoxy. In the next chapter I face the always-looming problem of nihilism perhaps most directly, engaging, with Linda Zerilli and Daniel Bell Jr., the problem of judgment today. As here what was at stake is whether the radical democrat Connolly might offer cogent critique of secularism, so in the next chapter what is at stake is whether Zerilli might offer a cogent critique of nihilism.

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235 1 Corinthians 1:22-23.
Introduction to the Problem of Judgment

When we ask in political and ethical life why some judgment is valid, such as the common judgment that all humans qua humans possess something called “dignity,” we are, at least in part, seeking the grounds on which that judgment is held – “why is it true that humans possess dignity?”

In epochs past, great thinkers and even lay people might have responded to such a “why” question with metaphysical foundations or sources, most likely the belief in a deity which in some way is the firm ground of value judgments. Some modern people respond in this manner as well, though its unpopularity seems to be growing in our secular age. Meanwhile, there is a tendency among political theorists not to respond in this manner at all. Rather, the much more common move is to disavow metaphysical foundations entirely when theorizing why and how judgments possess validity.

If I am right to note this tendency in contemporary political theory, then I believe my contemporaries in fact possess a sophisticated theoretical reason not to seek the metaphysical foundations of judgment. The reason is that such foundations essentially are not – they do not exist, or if they exist, they exist only as constructions or inventions of one sort or another – or, worse, they veil prejudices and protect unjust powers. Though ultimately I disagree with this argument, I believe it is challenging, daunting, and worthy of the utmost respect. The argument that metaphysical foundations do not exist has its most powerful statement in Nietzsche, who
declares: “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.”236 By these curious sentences, Nietzsche does not just mean that the God of the Abrahamic religions is no more. The claim is broader. As Alexander Nehamas notes, when Nietzsche’s madman announces the death of God this also announces the “problems of the erosion of the authority of tradition and of the grounding of value.”237 As God dies so too perishes the power of tradition and the firm grounding of values. One of the great French Nietzscheans of the twentieth century, Michel Foucault, teaches the full meaning of the death of God when he suggests an imminent death of Man “in profound correlation” with the former.238 The death of God signifies that all traditional categories of thought are thrown into crisis. It is in this context that the question of political judgment arises anew, and it is in this context that we find ourselves mired in a crisis of judgment, which manifests itself in just the way Linda Zerilli suggests: as radical subjectivism and world-alienation.239

Hannah Arendt astutely speaks of the “original spirit which has so sadly evaporated from the key words of political language – such as freedom and justice, authority and reason, responsibility and virtue, power and glory – leaving behind empty shells with which to settle almost all accounts.”240 This is the contemporary political philosophical situation in the wake of God’s death. With only these “empty shells” to guide us, it becomes very difficult to make valid political judgments or to discern even what it means for a judgment to be valid. To judge would seem to entail the employment of some standard in order to make valid evaluative claims, yet the modern situation, as Arendt and Nietzsche note, seems to be bereft of firm standards. This calls for a reexamination of political judgment, and Arendt herself most significantly for contemporary

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political theory performs this task. It is, I think, no coincidence that she first takes up the question of judgment anew in *Between Past and Future*, a book composed, she claims, of “exercises” in thought rendered necessary because “no answers, handed down by tradition, are available and valid any longer.”\(^{241}\) Among Arendt’s boldest claims is that Kant’s Third Critique, not his Second, “contains perhaps the greatest and most original aspect of Kant’s political philosophy.”\(^{242}\) This should strike readers of the Third Critique as an especially odd claim considering that that text concerns almost exclusively aesthetics and teleology. Kant himself certainly does not seem to consider the book to be a work relating to politics or political theory. However, Arendt sees the work as political insofar as it necessitates the ability to think in the place of others, to anticipate communication with others – judgment, in short, requires a world shared with others – a claim which, we shall see, serves as centrally important for Zerilli.\(^{243}\) In addition, Arendt claims that while truth coerces and compels agreement, judgment persuades and seeks to woo others.\(^{244}\)

Meanwhile, discussions of moral or philosophical truth, such as Kant’s Second Critique, are “unpolitical by nature” insofar as they involve only man in the singular.\(^{245}\)

Contemporaneous with the apparent withering of the old metaphysical notions such as God and the Good, we have today grown ever more conscious and concerned with plurality and difference. We have learned that not everyone is like “us” – and even this latter identity (“us”) is in fact riddled with difference. It seems to us obviously wrong to coerce the other to act or think like us, and so pluralism becomes a good rather than an evil for us today. In light of the value of pluralism, the question of judgment – “How can theory or conception born in a ‘here and now’

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\(^{241}\) Ibid., 13–15.  
\(^{242}\) Ibid., 216.  
\(^{243}\) Ibid., 217.  
\(^{244}\) Ibid., 219, see also 235ff.  
\(^{245}\) Ibid., 241.
project a cogency ‘there and then?’” – becomes problematic.  

It is very difficult today to assert any transcontextual ground for the validity of judgment – indeed, even the Radically Orthodox account of judgment I put forth toward the end of this chapter is not properly “transcontextual” but rather takes the form of a narrative emerging at a particular time and place, i.e. in a particular context. Yet, though pluralism would seem allied to historicism, in fact advocates of pluralism realize that it, too, must be defended. In order to promote pluralism, we must be able to defend the view that pluralism is good. How can this be done today, after the death of the old foundations? How can we support any of our treasured political judgments today? It is from this troubled terrain, riddled with contradiction and paradox, that today’s theorists of judgment begin.

Contemporary theories of judgment are greatly indebted to Arendt. However this does not mean they are reducible to Arendt’s own theory, such as it is. Nevertheless, contemporary thinkers like Alessandro Ferrara, Kennan Ferguson, Ronald Beiner and many others who take up the problem of judgment write within the long shadow cast by Arendt. Perhaps she is so singularly influential simply because she did not attempt to rescue judgment from the modern predicament – the collapse of shared standards – but attempted to write from within it. Perhaps also there is in Arendt’s writings, like those of her teacher and sometime lover Heidegger, an irreducible air of mystery, a never-to-be-solved riddle. Arendt does not so much solve problems as she dwells within them, and perhaps there is something deeply attractive about such a stance today, when we tend to greatly privilege questions over all attempts at answers.

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Literature on Arendt – both her thoughts on judgment and the many other facets of her work – has grown immensely over the last three decades, to the point where it is well worth asking whether the Arendt literature is not now thoroughly saturated. Therefore I shall not endeavor here one more commentary upon her.

Instead, I shall take up the theory of judgment on offer from Zerilli, who borrows greatly from Arendt but is not simply an expositor of the latter’s theory. Zerilli finds herself within the modern crisis of judgment described above, but she does not turn to theory or philosophy as a means of solving this crisis – very unlike, for instance, Leo Strauss and his disciples. To the contrary, Zerilli tells us plainly that only politics holds out hope of a solution today. In what follows I shall describe Zerilli’s theory and then attempt to draw out the ramifications of her suggestion that only politics now can help us. Specifically, I shall argue that Zerilli reduces judgment to power, and in this way she cannot evade nihilism despite her intentions. As I have done throughout this dissertation, I shall turn, pace Zerilli, to Radical Orthodoxy, as a possible alternative. In this chapter I turn to Daniel M. Bell Jr., who offers a theologically informed account of judgment which, I think, holds out hope of avoiding the conclusion of nihilism. Here once more, then, I compare and contrast a radical democrat, Zerilli, who shares the basic assumptions of radical democracy which I set forth in the introduction, and Radical Orthodoxy. My thesis here remains the same as in the dissertation more generally: once more I contend that Radical Orthodoxy provides an account sensitive to the issues raised by radical democrats, but avoids the pitfalls associated with that tendency, in this case nihilism.

Zerilli’s Theory
It is perhaps the case that Zerilli, in her writings on judgment, is more concerned that we, as political actors, make judgments than with the question of the validity of judgments. After all, she claims, quoting Kant, that “[w]e feel our freedom’…when we judge aesthetically or, as Arendt shows, politically.” What does this complex notion of feeling our freedom actually mean? Zerilli helps to elaborate the idea: “we judge objects and events in their freedom. We don’t have to hold these truths to be self-evident any more than we have to hold men and women equal or the rose beautiful; nothing compels us. There is nothing necessary in what we hold. That we do so hold is an expression of our freedom.” Consider also the following passage from a different article:

Perhaps it is time to stop covering up the origin of our capacity to judge and begin to recognize that productive imagination, the capacity to see relations between things that have none (i.e., no necessary relations), is the condition of concept formation tout court; it lies at the foundation of all our thought – and also our freedom.

To judge requires what Zerilli calls imagination, or the ability to make present to our minds that which actually is absent. Hence imagination is a “productive” capacity, a capacity which produces relations between things where those relations do not exist. Imagination is what makes the act of judgment simultaneously an act of freedom. Literally speaking, there is no compelling reason to hold any particular judgment. But this is just to say that there is no ultimate ground (“transcontextual” or otherwise) for our judgments, since any ultimate ground would provide a compelling reason to hold at least some judgments, even if that ultimate ground was not perfectly grasped or understood.

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249 Zerilli, “We Feel Our Freedom,” 183.
250 Ibid.
Because there is no ultimate ground for any judgments, it follows that “there simply is no extrapolitical guarantee (e.g., epistemic privilege) that my judgment is valid or that it will be accepted by others or that it ought to be.”\[^{252}\] It also follows that “the rules for judgment are no longer given or guaranteed by something outside the contingent human practice of judgment itself.”\[^{253}\] The making of judgments and the validity of judgments is based on no transcontextual, supra-political notions. Rather, judgments are simply worked out politically, through the rising and falling clamor of political contestations, with neither side, neither judge possessing any ultimate ground or reason for their judgments or the validity of those judgments. The freedom of making judgments truly is abyssal, at least insofar as there is no solid ground on which judges may stand. Here we can already see the basic tenets of Zerilli’s theory of judgment: there are no foundations to which to refer, there is only politics, and this means there are no extra-political guarantees of a judgment’s validity. Crucially lacking from the picture painted thus far is the concept of the common world, which comes to occupy a central place in her thinking, as I shall discuss presently.

Zerilli elaborates and expands on her views of judgment in her recent book, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*. It is among the richest and surely most thoroughly researched works which I personally have come across. It is also a work of pure theory, in which Zerilli sets forth her own views through close readings of a wide array of thinkers, including Arendt, Cavell, Wittgenstein, Kant, Hume, and Strauss, among others. Here I am not so much concerned with objecting to Zerilli’s readings of these figures (though I break this rule briefly regarding Arendt) as much as I am with discerning her own thoughts. This exercise can be difficult precisely because she cites

\[^{253}\] Ibid., 299.
other authors so heavily, and so her own views (as opposed to Arendt’s or Cavell’s or whomever) are sometimes not easy to see. Nevertheless, in what follows I endeavor to do just this.

In this book, Zerilli’s theory of judgment remains similar to that found in her earlier articles, but she foregrounds the importance of “a common world” to a much greater extent. Indeed, I think this is the central concept of the book, and a rough synopsis of the book’s argument is that the crisis in judgment can be solved only politically, not philosophically, through the recreation of a common world. To proceed, I shall first note how Zerilli’s new book remains consistent with her older works with respect to the concepts of political judgment and imagination. I shall then discuss her concept of the common world and its importance. Along the way I shall offer, by way of a brief digression, one specific criticism of Zerilli’s reading of Arendt, namely that Zerilli seems to underestimate Arendt’s concern with the notion of validity.

As in her earlier works, two concepts of central importance in Zerilli’s book are imagination and political judgment, and I think the definitions remain unchanged, though she does not discuss imagination at great length in the book. Zerilli notes that judging requires “an ability and a willingness to imagine how the world looks to people whose standpoints one does not necessarily share,” a practice Arendt called representative thinking and which Zerilli calls imagination.254 As I shall soon show, for Zerilli this practice of imagination is integrally related to the concept of a common world, such that in a common world we can practice imagination best, and when we practice imagination, we begin to form a common world. As for political judgment, once again Zerilli seems in her book to be consistent with her earlier thoughts. Political judgment is a judgment arrived at politically: “‘political’ characterizes the means or process by which judgment proceeds.”255 Or as she puts it later, “judgment is political not because it is about political

254 Zerilli, A Democratic Theory of Judgment, 1.
255 Ibid., 7.
objects that are prior and external to it but because it proceeds by taking into account the perspectives of others.”

It might be objected that this conception of political judgment seems not to involve contestation in the same manner as described above. I reply that, nevertheless, at issue here is still moving back and forth between differing perspectives, and thus it would seem an ideal of contestation remains latent. After all, there is no politics without contestation, and so a judgment achieved through a political process is just to say the judgment is achieved through contestation. Throughout her work, political judgment is political precisely because it involves the back and forth of perspectives, because it involves contestation, disagreement, and so forth. Thus I submit that Zerilli’s view of political judgment in fact is consistent in both her earlier and her more recent work.

However, in her recent book she foregrounds the importance of the common world and its relation to judgment much more explicitly than in her earlier work. She claims, for instance, that what theorists who prioritize validity miss was “right there in front of” her – and this is the importance of the common world.

What is the common world, and how does it relate to questions of judgment? Zerilli claims that in judging, “[w]hat someone might mean points not inward to some private mental realm but outward to a shared sense of reality and conditions of meaning,” i.e. what Arendt (and following her Zerilli) calls a common world. “For Arendt,” – and I would add for Zerilli as well – “the modern problem of judgment is not one of specifying criteria but of creating and maintaining a political space in which differences in valuation can be publicly expressed and judged.” Today this sense of a common world is lost, and in its wake we experience the familiar feelings of “doubt,

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256 Ibid., 267.
257 Ibid., xii.
258 Ibid., 26–27.
259 Ibid., 28.
anomie, and loneliness,“²⁶⁰ where each individual is seemingly trapped in his or her own private subjective experience with little to no connection to a shared, common world. In our frayed, fragmented world today, we do not hold expressions, the meanings of words, or much else that is significant in common. Though neither Arendt nor Zerilli concentrate their attention upon it, I think some of the loss of a common world must be at least partly attributed to the development of so-called “neoliberal” capitalism, in which we are bound together only by commodity exchange and, of course, the all-important circulation of money. In any case, the loss of a common world is felt acutely today, as we are increasingly, in the words of Michael Hardt, “isolated together,”²⁶¹ going about our own private business and turning to matters of public importance only in times of crisis. This relates clearly to the well-known Arendtian thesis concerning the evaporation of the public sphere as it is eclipsed by the private sphere.

If the legacy of the lost common world surrounds us in modern mass society, what might a truly common world look like? Interestingly enough, for Zerilli, a common world is evinced especially through the presence of a wide range of plural, diverse perspectives. She wishes to call attention to the ways in which different perspectives reveal “something about the world,” i.e. they force us to see different aspects of common objects, and thus the more perspectives available, the more objectively we shall see the world.²⁶² Plural perspectives literally bring the common world into view, in its many rich facets. As Zerilli notes, “the very concept of perspective is meaningless absent an object on which it is a perspective.”²⁶³ Thus, for Zerilli, the basic problem today is not that “we have…too many but too few perspectives from which to see the world. Accordingly, it is not adjudication [i.e. concern with validity] but pluralization and the expansion of the common

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 35.
²⁶² Zerilli, A Democratic Theory of Judgment, 39.
²⁶³ Ibid., 268.
world that should concern us.” A common world, then, is one in which a rich, diverse, plural set of perspectives contest and engage with one another about objects, and this at the very least holds out some hope of solving the crisis of judgment because it entails both the sharing of perspectives among many different people and, through that interaction, it also entails that the world will more accurately, more objectively, come into view. Perhaps then judgment will cease to appear to be a wholly private matter for isolated individuals, but instead it will become a public, shared matter for communities. Perhaps with a common world we shall once more have a shared space in which to discuss our considered judgments, or at least this seems to be Zerilli’s hope. The political task before us is to get to work building such a world, surely a very difficult task. The philosophical task, meanwhile, would seem only to be to call attention to the loss of the common world.

Later I shall note at greater length that all of this entails that, paradoxically, the problem of judgment for Zerilli is almost entirely a political problem, and philosophy seems only to be able to help us in acknowledging that this is a political problem and not a philosophical one (this also relates, I note by way of preview, to my accusation that Zerilli falls into nihilism). Strangely this strikes me as a kind of Kantian position: the task is to demonstrate the limits of philosophical discourse, and the latter is indeed very limited in what it can do for us. But first I wish briefly to note a couple other features of Zerilli’s account that disturb me, at least.

First, I think Zerilli underestimates the extent to which Arendt cares about the question of validity. Zerilli speaks “of Arendt’s own stunning indifference to judging, understood as the problem of adjudicating incommensurable value differences in the absence of a transcendent conception of the good.” I interpret Zerilli here as claiming that Arendt is indifferent to questions of validity in judgment, an interpretation which strikes me as reasonable precisely because Zerilli

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264 Ibid., 38.
265 Ibid., xii.
tells us that she speaks of validity in terms of adjudication. This strikes me as a problematic reading of Arendt. It ignores entirely Arendt’s fascination with the notion of exemplary validity.\textsuperscript{266} Somehow for Arendt a certain particular might carry with it a guide for determining valid judgments. If we are interested in goodness, for instance, we do not proceed from some universal called “goodness” and move from there, deductively, to determine instances of goodness in the world. To the contrary, we proceed from the particular, from an example, so long as it is “rightly chosen.” Thus Arendt claims, in an almost off-handed manner I find quite remarkable, that “[i]f we say of somebody that he is good, we have in the back of our minds the example of Saint Francis or Jesus of Nazareth.”\textsuperscript{267} Might something like this notion be in Arendt’s mind when she speaks elsewhere of the importance of “pearl-diving” in our own dark times, that is, plunging the depths in order to bring lost or forgotten thoughts of some value “up into the world of the living”?\textsuperscript{268} This last is only speculation on my part – food for thought. However, it is jarring, to me at least, that while Ronald Beiner, the editor of Arendt’s lectures on Kant, suggests that the notion of exemplary validity “supplies an indispensable piece in the puzzle if we hope to reconstruct the full contours of Arendt’s theory of judging,”\textsuperscript{269} Zerilli is wholly uninterested in the concept. Indeed, this concept only appears once in Zerilli’s book, in a quotation of Kant.\textsuperscript{270} Perhaps this omission is simply because Zerilli believes Arendt’s conception of judgment has more to do with freedom than with validity. Nevertheless, I struggle personally to make sense of this.

Second, Zerilli’s belief that we require more perspectives today rather than fewer is suspiciously akin to the dominant, basically liberal values of our time. Most every college and

\textsuperscript{267} Ibid., 84.
\textsuperscript{268} Hannah Arendt, \textit{Men in Dark Times} (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1968), 206.
\textsuperscript{269} Arendt, \textit{Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy}, 79.
\textsuperscript{270} Zerilli, \textit{A Democratic Theory of Judgment}, 65.
university in America is at pains to declare itself a great friend of diversity, plurality, difference, and so forth. American urban centers are astoundingly diverse in character— one has no difficulty in Chicago, Los Angeles, or New York in encountering a staggering array of perspectives on politics, faith, culture, sexual relations, and so forth. Yet Zerilli, working at the University of Chicago, is somehow convinced that our politics is instead too stultifying, too limiting, and not diverse enough—a version of a thesis one encounters remarkably often in academic political theory today. Can this truly be the case? Will a common world come into view if only we include more perspectives? I am rather persuaded that diversity, plurality, difference, etc. are in fact precisely the kinds of values we might expect a liberal capitalist society to hold dear. Perhaps it is the case that Zerilli is actually an uncomplicated advocate of liberal capitalism, but I find this unlikely. I hasten to note that these thoughts constitute only a suspicion on my part. Zerilli seeks in some way to transform the worldless world in which we live, yet the means she suggests are eminently timely, remarkably in tune with the dominant spirit of the age. And perhaps, as intellectuals, we ought to be most ruthlessly skeptical precisely when the world we wish to criticize—the status quo—is presented back to us dressed up as critical theory. Another way of putting this suspicion on my part is to note that it is wholly unsurprising to encounter Zerilli’s thesis in 2017. To the contrary, her thesis about the goodness of diversity and multiple perspectives is precisely what we ought to expect today.

**The Philosopher against Philosophy**

Zerilli, commenting on feminist disputes regarding the validity of judgments and the always- looming threat of relativism, suggests that the threat of relativism “is a picture that holds
us captive,” one that “we do well to question.” In her recent book too, she claims similarly that “relativism is a false problem.” Her aim is not to defeat the charge of relativism but to reject entirely the picture in which the threat of relativism comes to the fore. There are a few reasons she gives for why we should reject the “picture” of relativism. First, she suggests that to accept the charge of relativism “almost inevitably” takes us back to what she calls “rationalism,” which is a non-starter since rationalism presumes the given-ness of rules or principles for judgment. Indeed, if the only alternative to relativism is such a rationalism, then perhaps Zerilli is right to reject the terms of the debate entirely. Second, and more interestingly, Zerilli suggests that to judge is an eminently practical rather than philosophical problem: in the philosophical discussions of relativism, “which typically feature a complete paralysis of our critical faculties, what is at stake is not really practical judgment in first-order discourses such as politics” but rather the ability of philosophy to discern a metatheoretical foundation for judgment. It is indeed a difficult problem to discern valid from invalid judgments, she says, but the problem is not a philosophical one but a practical political one. To continue to pose the problem of judgment in philosophical terms is for Zerilli to fall prey to the “real threat of nihilism” which “is not the loss of standards as such but the refusal to accept the consequences of that loss.” In other words, it is a dead end to continue to posit firm standards in the wake of the destruction of all firm standards. To accept the consequences of the loss of standards for judgment is just to cease to discuss judgment as a philosophical problem.

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272 Zerilli, A Democratic Theory of Judgment, 182. I wonder whether this claim contradicts her earlier claim “that judging cannot wholly evade the question of what counts as real or objective, perhaps as true…” (p. xiii). If we must concern ourselves with what counts as real and what counts as true, then it is difficult to imagine that relativism is not problematic.
274 Ibid., 315.
275 Ibid., 309.
What does it mean to consider judgment a practical political problem, and how might this allow us to reject relativism as a problem? If judgment is a practical problem, then Zerilli suggests it is a problem to be addressed in politics, not in philosophy. The real actors and judges here are not philosophers writing articles and books but those many citizens who engage in the messy world of politics. Furthermore, “[t]he real problem of judgment in the context of widespread value pluralism is not relativism, the inability to judge cultures and practices not our own, but the failure to take genuine account of the strangeness of what we are judging.” The problem, then, is not to consider a philosophical path to the defeat of relativism but rather a practical problem of how to disclose and take account of the world itself in its plurality and strangeness. Zerilli tells us that we must open ourselves to the other, to the world’s strangeness, not because it is the ethical thing to do “but because seeing the world from different perspectives is the political condition of impartiality and objectivity…[and those perspectives] give us more worldly reality.” I am not sure how successful Zerilli’s non-ethical but political demand to consider multiple perspectives is, simply because she seems unable to offer any reason for why we ought to do this – that it opens more worldly reality to us does not yet provide any account for why we should desire greater worldly reality. In any case, Zerilli’s basic move is now fairly clear: she rejects relativism as a problem just insofar as judgment is not a problem for philosophy but a problem for politics.

As I demonstrated above, Zerilli makes the same move in her book. Consistently she demurs from the philosophical quest for what counts as a valid judgment and focuses instead on the need to recreate a common world. Consider for instance her own description of her central thesis: “it is the shrinking of the common world in which plural perspectives can be voiced, and not the otherwise ‘impenetrable pluralism of ultimate value orientations’ absent some ordering

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276 Ibid., 315.
277 Ibid., 314.
mechanism, that is the real problem of judgment in modern democracies.” Zerilli’s concern here is obvious: while her own project foregrounds the importance of a common world and thus plural perspectives, the philosophical search for true foundations for judgment risks seeing pluralism as a threat rather than a good. I wonder whether Zerilli is not at risk of question begging here, insofar as she presumes the good of pluralism rather than argues for it – and, once again, that pluralism opens up more worldly reality is not itself an argument for pluralism, because it remains to be argued that “more worldly reality” is a good thing, something we should pursue. Nevertheless, it is hopefully clear from the forgoing that for Zerilli, the only possible solution to the crisis of judgment is political in nature.

However, this seems to put Zerilli in the paradoxical position of writing philosophical books and papers, and making passionate philosophical arguments, in order to demonstrate the impotence of the philosopher. If Zerilli is correct that judgment is a political and not a philosophical problem, then she necessarily has the last word on the matter qua philosopher. That last philosophical word is this: philosophy has nothing worthwhile to say about judgment, except first to inform us of the loss of the common world and second to inform us that philosophy cannot solve the problem. There seems to be a rather daunting problem with this thesis. It would seem that one of the things political philosophy does is to make judgments about political things: about the right, about the good, about the just. Yet if Zerilli is correct that judgment is a matter of politics and not philosophy, the tradition of political philosophy has gotten things wrong, indeed, topsy-turvy. Zerilli too makes judgments, and, obviously, these can only possess validity politically, or through contestation. But if this is correct, then it would seem to follow that the distinction between the philosopher and the sophist or rhetorician is not as firm as Plato thought. And if philosophers

278 Zerilli, A Democratic Theory of Judgment, 280.
are but one type of rhetoricians in a vast sea of rhetoricians, is it not true that we are exceptionally poor rhetoricians? Does Zerilli’s thesis that judgment is ultimately a matter of politics not serve to render philosophy on equal intellectual footing with literally any other positing of judgments, whether from other philosophers or from 140 word tweets? In other words, it seems to me that her thesis destroys any raison d’être for the academic philosophical pursuit entirely, whether political philosophy or any other sort. If Zerilli is right, is it not also right that we have for too long clung to the myth that we as philosophers have something special to say, that we are not merely a few political actors among many. In a fairly short space, Zerilli explodes what was perhaps always a tenuous distinction between philosophy and politics. Yet the explosion is, for all that, somewhat one-sided: in Zerilli’s world, philosophy is unmasked as politics, the philosopher unmasked as a politician.

Interestingly enough, there is today a rich tradition in political theory circles of political theorists claiming that only politics, and not theory or philosophy, can help us out of our predicament. Ironically the thesis that philosophy is impotent is all the rage among political philosophers. From Bonnie Honig279 to George Ciccariello-Maher,280 political theorists of late seek to show that we should not “solve” matters of politics by pursuing truth. Instead we should acknowledge politics as a site of contingent, endless contestation – an anarchic, chaotic dance that cannot be curtailed. Truth too, says Foucault, usually to thunderous applause, is political. To demonstrate the political, contested nature of many of the so-called truths we take for granted is an important part of Foucault’s general project, after all. To this chorus Zerilli joins her voice: even on matters of judgment, we must turn to politics, not to philosophy.

However, this conceptualization of the work of political theory – to show that only politics can save us – presents with it a host of problems. As I mentioned above, if it’s all a matter of politics, if judgments themselves are inextricably political in nature, if philosophy can at best alert us to this truth, then what is the role of the political philosopher? Surely she too is, ultimately, only one more practitioner of politics like everyone else? Yet political philosophers, if we are honest with ourselves, tend to make for exceptionally poor politicians. We struggle to persuade our fellows. Typically we lack charisma. We are not trained to arouse our followers to passion. We are not trained to win dirty – through lies and deception. In short, we tend to be rotten at politics.

Furthermore, it is exceptionally difficult on this view to justify the place of academic political theory. All judgments are political in nature, even the judgment that there ought to be paid experts in political theory dispensing knowledge to paying undergraduates. If we ask on what grounds this judgment is made, the answer, we know from Zerilli, cannot be that it is based on the truth – that we really do possess wisdom that justifies our place. The arrangement is rather a contingent product of contestation – not a stirring defense of political theory at a time when it, like the humanities generally, is at-risk as a field of study in universities across the country. If we are practitioners of politics like everyone else, then on what grounds are our papers and books superior to posts on social media? On what grounds have we anything at all special and noteworthy to say? On what grounds ought political theory to exist?

All of this is to come to my basic thesis concerning Zerilli, which is that she cannot elude the conclusion of nihilism, despite her intentions. My argument is, I think, straightforward: just insofar as Zerilli reduces questions of judgment to power, she falls into nihilism. To be a nihilist as I am using the term is to assert that there are no good reasons to cling to judgments concerning the better and worse, the good and the bad. Nihilism in this sense connotes the failure of political
philosophy as such. Political philosophy is the study of the good society, and this study presupposes some access to knowledge of the good. The nihilist retorts that such knowledge is always illusory. For Zerilli, there is no outside, so to speak, to politics. Instead, every judgment is always political. This is also to say that every judgment is an effect of power – the latter is intrinsic to politics, and to say something is political is also to say it is a matter of power. Now, whereas many of the ancients and medieval were at pains to tie politics to the common good, for Zerilli this would amount once more to asserting the supremacy of philosophy or truth over politics. In this way, I argue that Zerilli effectively reduces judgment to power. If this is correct, we must then ask whether the reduction of truth to power can be anything but nihilistic. I want to suggest that it cannot: raw power, unmoored to the good, is indifferent to all values – it is extra-moral, so to speak.

To perhaps argue with Zerilli against Zerilli, it strikes me that there are exceptionally good, practical reasons to oppose her view that judgment is a political, not philosophical, problem. Perhaps instead we ought once more to ask how philosophy might serve to illumine questions of judgment – and even to provide on its own, through reason and argument and discourse, solutions to the crisis of judgment in which we remain.

This entails, I think, a conception of judgment which, pace Zerilli, cannot be reduced to power. Below I shall sketch such a conception, drawing on the American RO theologian Daniel Bell Jr.

Daniel Bell’s “Theopolitical Judgment”

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281 All parenthetical citations in the section refer to Bell Jr., “Only Jesus Saves: Toward a Theopolitical Ontology of Judgment.”
Here I shall briefly sketch a theory of judgment, articulated by Daniel Bell Jr., which does not reduce judgment to power, unlike Zerilli’s. The subject of judgment is not written about much by the RO theologians, at least explicitly. Of course, in chapter one I described RO’s ontology of participation and peace, and of course this bears upon the problem of judgment in important ways. However, Bell Jr. has written an essay which, I think, holds out some hope of beginning to theorize this matter from the RO perspective. To conclude I shall briefly offer a reading of Bell’s essay as an alternative to the account I considered above.

If in lieu of Zerilli’s reduction of judgment to power we seek in a Radically Orthodox fashion to return to God as “foundation” in some sense\(^{282}\) – as Beauty, Truth, and Goodness itself, as Love itself\(^{283}\) – do we not bring forth precisely the risks that thinkers like Zerilli mean sensibly to avoid? That is, for instance, are we not then in danger of too hastily judging and even condemning others for their failure to uphold the commands of the divine? Are we not then in danger of refusing to associate, negotiate, and listen to our fellows and instead simply castigating them outright? Is this not just what we may avoid by claiming there are no extra-political guarantees of the validity of judgments, or by claiming that any standards of judgment must be internal to the process of making judgments? However, to rest content with the reduction of judgment to power is to rest content with nihilism, which provides no means to adjudicate reasonably between diverse judgments. If the judgment of God the Father is unbearably harsh, if it ends up sacrificing “the finite to the infinite,” then Zerilli’s account seems to portend a practice of chaos, of competition, of “combat and cruelty,” (213-214). How then might we proceed?

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\(^{283}\) See John 14:6, 1 Corinthians 1:1-13, 1 John 1:5, 1 John 4:8.
The answer that Radical Orthodoxy must provide is that judgment is neither a process wholly internal to itself, based on standards suspended only in thin air which may be at any point undone, but nor is judgment a matter simply of deduction from some transcendental rule – beneath which we may orderly place particulars. Rather the only possible valid judgment is that based on the person of Jesus Christ. However, just how does this help us any? Is this not just the same move as the one postfoundationalists like Zerilli rightly reject, a method of deduction? Here I wish to show briefly that this is not the case, that in Jesus the Christ emerges neither a sacrifice of the finite to the infinite nor of the infinite to the finite, but rather a harmony of these two, and indeed a logic of participation in which both infinite and finite are crucial.

Jesus as ground of judgment is peculiar first because Jesus himself has not one nature but two:

Jesus Christ, the fathers of the Church declared, is “perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity,” “truly God and truly man.” In him are found two natures which “undergo no confusion, no change, no division, no separation.” Elaborating on this, they state, “at no point was the difference between the natures taken away through the union, but rather the property of both natures is preserved and comes together into a single person and a single subsistent being; he is not parted or divided into two persons, but is one and the same only-begotten Son, God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ (214).

Jesus is peculiar because he is not simply a divinity above and apart from the world. Rather, he is the most intense meeting of the divine and the world, a meeting in which neither part is sacrificed but both persist in harmony. Further, in an orthodox Christian theology, we may never consider Jesus an abstract universal, an abstract rule, standing outside time, from whose lifelessness we may then discern judgments in the orderly fashion rejected by all nonfoundationalist theorists of judgment today. The situation is quite otherwise with Jesus, who is, to quote Hans Urs Von Balthasar, the “concrete universal” (quoted in Bell Jr., 215). As Bell Jr. explains, here “is not the setting of finitude in its assigned place according to a predetermined, transcendental order of fixed
essences,” (215). Indeed, to view Jesus, the man who walked the earth, in this manner is to accept his death but to refuse his Resurrection. For with this latter act, whereby Jesus defeats death itself, he remains for present for us, with us.285

Jesus, then, contrary to purported rules of judgment which render the practice an air of certainty, is a living force, and a man who is more than he outwardly appears to be. Contrary to an air of certainty, Jesus exists in history as the most profound of mysteries. On this matter, St. Paul is correct: “For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.”286 Against models of judgment wherein we may judge only in an utterly contestable manner, and against models wherein we know some transcendental standard with perfect clarity, Jesus is the coming-to-earth of the divine, revealing something, to be sure, but also necessarily concealing. As Bell Jr. notes, Jesus’s presence is, therefore, Eucharistic (220). Here the practice of judgment is radically transformed. Not only is it far more open – since Jesus is risen, is present, we cannot live and judge as if he is an inert, fully understood fact-of-the-matter – but also the practice of judgment itself is altered, so much so that Bell Jr. speaks of “the end of judgment” and a new mode of judgment barely recognizable as such, that of “forgiveness,” (219).

The judgment we must practice with Jesus therefore is one that does not swallow the particular in an infinite sea, but rather one that recognizes within the particular the light of the universal. It is for this reason that Jesus proclaims that “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”287 Here, then, we have a picture of judgment which is partial but not for that reason fictional, and in which the universal, indeed the Truth, does

284 1 Corinthians 15:26.
286 1 Corinthians 13:9-10.
287 Matthew 25:40.
not present itself to the particular in an imposing manner but rather with open arms, for the universal has no being apart from the particular.

This strikes me as an alternative theorization of judgment that surpasses the model rightly criticized by Zerilli, and yet remains immune to the criticisms I have offered against her in this chapter.

While in this chapter I have concerned myself exclusively with the problem of judgment and the corresponding problem of nihilism, the point of the dissertation as a whole, recall, is not only to offer a critique of nihilism and pursue a non-nihilistic mode of thinking, but also to defend a socialist politics (as I mentioned in the introduction, in my view the defense of socialism itself requires a non-nihilistic mode of thinking). In the next chapter, I shall put Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s radical democratic socialist vision in conversation with Milbank’s Christian socialist vision. Unsurprisingly, I shall argue that Milbank’s socialism succeeds in offering an alternative to capitalism while Laclau and Mouffe’s does not.
CHAPTER V

POLITICS

The politics of Radical Orthodoxy (RO) are usually summarized in the word “socialism.” In this chapter, I will seek to explore this politics by answering a few related questions. First, why does RO promote socialism as a politics proper to Christianity? Second, how is RO’s socialism distinguished from contemporary secular conceptions? Third, why might we favor RO’s conception of socialism in our historical moment? That is, what makes RO’s socialism especially attractive today?

In order to answer these questions, I will contrast the secular post-Soviet socialism which Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe present in the contemporary classic Hegemony and Socialist Strategy with the alternative, Radically Orthodox Christian vision especially of John Milbank. I conclude by defending a theologically informed, eminently liturgical, Christian socialism. Once this work has been completed, I will restate my guiding three questions and pose finally some answers to them.

The Socialism of Laclau and Mouffe

In 1985, Laclau and Mouffe published a contemporary classic on socialism that is still among the most widely-read and cited theoretical texts on socialism and radical democracy in the post-Soviet era. I shall analyze it here as a case study of post-Marxist radical political theory. Plainly, post-Marxist theory is an alarmingly broad umbrella term, yet the influence of Laclau and Mouffe is sufficient that I believe the analysis and critique I offer here might prove fruitful. Laclau
and Mouffe clearly (and rightly) wish to move beyond the Marxism they encountered in the 1980s, but only through an exploration of the categories which informed that analysis. As they put it in the Preface to the Second Edition, “Revisiting (reactivating) the Marxist categories in the light of these new problems and developments [i.e. since the Second International and the subsequent Communist legacy] had to lead, necessarily, to deconstructing the former – that is, to displacing some of their conditions of possibility and developing new possibilities which transcend anything which could be characterized as the application of a category.”288 In another respect also Laclau and Mouffe’s text stands as exemplary: it is a powerful theoretical statement of the kind of political practice that predominates in many Leftist circles today, practice that has been summarized with the well-worn notion of “the new social movements;”289 otherwise described, as I have done in this dissertation, as “identity politics.”290 While some contemporary theorists dismiss Laclau and Mouffe’s work as improperly or insufficiently Marxist,291 the import of their theory of radical democracy for understanding and assessing concrete radical politics today strikes me as evident.

I therefore take Laclau and Mouffe’s text as a specific case of a broader tendency among radical Leftists, both academic and nonacademic, to assess the way forward for radical politics after the demise of global Communism. As such, I shall show that Laclau and Mouffe’s argument concerning the future of socialist strategy suffers from problems that I conjecture to be common to many such secular analyses. Put concisely, their socialism, closed to transcendence, is too ontologically feeble to empower resistance to global capitalism capable of advancing a new, just

288 Laclau and Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics, xi. All subsequent parenthetical citations in this section refer to this text.
social order. For such resistance much prove able to combat the commodity form itself. It is my contention that Laclau and Mouffe – and many other contemporary radical theorists – in fact legitimate the very capitalist order that they wish apparently to oppose.

To put the matter another way, Laclau and Mouffe’s analysis of hegemonic articulations is, like Zerilli’s, in the end nihilistic. What does it mean for these analyses to be nihilistic? I mean that they operate in a terrain conceived quite literally as nothing, where anything might emerge and where any power might rule. Conor Cunningham puts the matter well: “nihilism is not lack, but, indeed, the extreme provision of intelligibility, values, gods, and so on. Yet what it provides is only nothing after all.” So we shall see that Laclau and Mouffe’s hegemonic blocs offer a kind of spectacle littered with contingency and defined by possibility – a sphere is constructed in which anything might happen, but anything that does happen is, in the end, nothing after all. This should sound similar to the analysis of immanentism I performed in chapter one – indeed, as I showed there, Laclau and Mouffe are themselves immanentists.

In the remainder of this section I will first briefly outline Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemonic blocs. I will then show why this theory is bound to lead to left hopelessness, despair, and, most importantly, why this theory is in fact consistent with the logic of neoliberal capitalism.

The theory

Laclau and Mouffe begin by rejecting the validity of orthodox Marxism. As they summarize their objections, “[i]t is not the case that the field of the economy is a self-regulated space subject to endogenous laws; not does their exist a constitutive principle for social agents that

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can be fixed in an ultimate class core; nor are class positions the necessary location of historical interests,” (85). That the economy is subject to its own laws – and thus unassailable or immovable from any position of externality – is, according to Laclau and Mouffe, the consensus of most of the Second International. It is only Georges Sorel who seems to sever this proposition (36-42) and affirm that even in the economic sphere it is politics that determines outcomes. Laclau and Mouffe explicitly avow this same conclusion (82). Likewise, it was dogmatic to presume that different historical classes possess a priori interests which then are able ultimately to explain political activity, as Kautsky, for instance, stubbornly claimed (15). Finally, it is not the case that it is the historical destiny of the working class (an identity which remains always elusive for orthodox Marxists [84]) to lead the revolution toward the socialist future, a view that even a champion of Laclau and Mouffe, namely Gramsci, seemed to maintain (69-70). Insofar as orthodox Marxism asserted necessity to the unfolding of history, insofar as it viewed the working class as necessarily united rather than fragmented, and insofar as it claimed the revolutionary struggle is ultimately to be led by the working class, it was mistaken and must be rejected.

I wish to state clearly before moving on that I find Laclau and Mouffe’s critique and eventual condemnation of orthodox Marxism to be correct. If it is “post-Marxist” to oppose orthodox Marxism, then surely we all ought today to be post-Marxists, and we ought to celebrate this leap, small though it may be.293

The alternative which Laclau and Mouffe offer to orthodox Marxism is captured in their concept of the hegemonic articulation. It is helpful to begin explaining this concept by contrasting it to the orthodox Marxist vision being opposed. If orthodox Marxists viewed history as an epic struggle between classes which was reaching its zenith as the proletariat would soon acquire power

and, thereby, eliminate the class system in its entirety, ushering in a new era of human history, Laclau and Mouffe contend rather that the social sphere is defined by endless contestation between competing articulations struggling for hegemony (this emphasis on contestation should be familiar from my discussions of other radical democrats in this dissertation, such as Connolly and Zerilli). In order to understand the social theory of Laclau and Mouffe, then, we must first understand the remarkable power of their conception of articulations. Beginning with this notion I will then explain more fully their vision of the social.

Laclau and Mouffe straightforwardly define articulation and discourse: “we will call articulation any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice, we will call discourse,” (105). There are a few things to note immediately. First, we already see that identity is a major conceptual category, and that identity is not external to articulations but is rather “modified” as a result of these articulations. Indeed, one of the persistent themes of the text is that the characteristics of any identity in the social sphere are never fixed a priori. Consider the following example: “If the working class, as a hegemonic agent, manages to articulate around itself a number of democratic demands and struggles, this is due not to any a priori structural privilege, but to a political initiative on the part of the class,” (65). In other words, the identity of the working class and its role in social struggles is not determined prior to its own “political initiative;” rather, it is constituted partly through its own articulation of its demands. Indeed, we may refer to “working class politics” as a discourse in precisely Laclau and Mouffe’s sense. We do this because to declare “working class politics” a discourse is not to declare that it is established finally, once and for all. Nor is it to declare that “working class politics” constitutes a totality or a system such that some class of political and social activity (e.g. feminist activism)
constitutes a “moment” of the overarching system. Here Laclau and Mouffe purposely set themselves apart from reductionist accounts familiar from orthodox Marxist accounts of the social. In contrast to these older accounts, Laclau and Mouffe affirm that “if contingency and articulation are possible, this is because no discursive formation is a sutured totality and the transformation of the elements into moments is never complete,” (106-7). Here we see the now-familiar post-structuralist criticism of system logics, and the post-structuralist alternative: a more chaotic, less predictable field of articulations and then of (always-in-principle-open-and-incomplete) discourses. Indeed, for Laclau and Mouffe there is no practice that is not a discursive practice (107). Articulations and the discourses they create are so central for this conception of the social that Laclau and Mouffe claim that “[t]he social is articulation,” (114). All else in their theory makes sense only in light of this articulatory, discursive rendering of the social.

It is not only the case that the social is a field of articulations, but also that these articulations compete with one another – the social, in other words, is marked by antagonisms. For Laclau and Mouffe, antagonisms follow from the always-incomplete, forever-open nature of the social: “Antagonism as the negation of a given order is, quite simply, the limit of that order,” (126). Antagonisms are the secret incompleteness of any apparent identity, of any apparent positivity. Antagonisms are not, pace Hegel, moments of a new overarching totality which will include in turn both poles of the antagonism. Akin to other post-structuralists, here difference supercedes dialectic. The emphasis on the role of antagonism here reveals the ontological primacy of negativity in this vision of the social (see especially 145); indeed, “all positivity is metaphorical

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294 On the post-structuralist character of Laclau and Mouffe’s analysis, see Goldstein, Post-Marxist Theory: An Introduction, chap. 3; and Smith, Laclau and Mouffe: The Radical Democratic Imaginary, 3.
and subvertible,” (126). Antagonisms may emerge from anywhere – there is, in other words, no privileged locus of antagonism: “any position in a system of differences, insofar as it is negated, can become the locus of an antagonism,” (131). Perhaps most importantly, it is important to stress that antagonisms are the effect of will, insofar as they may or may not arise, depending on the elements involved. There is nothing natural or necessary to antagonisms, and it is for this reason that Laclau and Mouffe clearly differentiate their notion of antagonism from “real opposition” or “contradiction” (122-125). In lieu of any such necessity, contingency reigns.

As I mentioned above, it is within this perennially open articulatory and discursive field that identities are created. One such identity is the subject. Along with theorists like Foucault,296 Laclau and Mouffe affirm that the subject is, strictly speaking, a “fiction,” (see 119). More specifically, Laclau and Mouffe contend that “the subject is constructed through language, as a partial and metaphorical incorporation into a symbolic order,” (126). Importantly, what this means for political practice is that there is no universal subject which is the necessary agent of radical social change: “the epistemological niche from which ‘universal’ classes and subjects spoke has been eradicated, and it has been replaced by a polyphony of voices, each of which constructs its own irreducible discursive identity,” (191). There exists, in other words, an ontological equivalence between different subject positions (167-168), and major social upheaval might be the result of articulation from any subject position.

We may now consider the role of hegemony in this analysis. On this point, it is worthwhile to quote Laclau and Mouffe at length:

The general field of the emergence of hegemony is that of articulatory practices, that is, a field where the ‘elements’ have not crystallized into ‘moments’. In a closed system of relational identities, in which the meaning of each moment is absolutely fixed, there is no place whatsoever for a hegemonic practice. A fully successful system of differences, which excluded any floating signifier, would not make

possible any articulation; the principle of repetition would dominate every practice within this system and there would be nothing to hegemonize. It is because hegemony supposes the incomplete and open character of the social, that it can take place only in a field dominated by articulatory practices (134).

Much that I have thus far discussed comes to fruition with this concept of hegemonic articulations. In other words, Laclau and Mouffe mean that hegemony may only arise in a social sphere which is unlike that that orthodox Marxists supposed. For in that kind of closed social sphere, each articulation could be reduced to an element of the class struggle – each articulation would have to be analyzed according to whether it advanced the workers’ struggle or not. In such a society “there would be nothing to hegemonize” because, in effect, hegemonization has already taken place: one set of articulations, united into a discourse, has already achieved hegemony. Contrarily, Laclau and Mouffe present to us a society in which different sets of articulations compete for hegemony, and this contestation is endless. Further, the coming-to-be of one hegemonic articulation never precludes different future hegemonic articulations. Rather, as with any identity, each hegemonic articulation is fundamentally precarious. We have now come a very long way from the old Marxist vision of any final dramatic “world-historical” victory of the proletariat. Now, any such victory would be the result of the hegemony achieved by a particular discourse against other discourses, and this victory would be false in the sense that antagonism would not in fact be eliminated but would rather simply be restructured, destined to arise again in new and unexpected ways.

Within this new social sphere emerges what Laclau and Mouffe call the democratic revolution: “With this we shall designate the end of a society of a hierarchic and inequalitarian type, ruled by a theological-political logic in which the social order had its foundation in divine will,” (155). 297 The democratic revolution is, generally, a multi-faceted revolution whereby relations of

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297 It is perhaps worth noting in an aside the peculiar voluntarist conception of divinity to which Laclau and Mouffe have here called attention. This is peculiar only because it is a thoroughly modern conception of divinity which is not to be found in the Patristic sources.
subordination are undone: “What we are referring to is a type of action whose objective is the transformation of a social relation which constructs a subject in a relationship of subordination,” (153). Thus, the “central problem is to identify the discursive conditions for the emergence of a collective action, directed towards struggling against inequalities and challenging relations of subordination,” (153). Now, to clarify, Laclau and Mouffe note that it is clearly not the case that antagonisms arise wherever there is found a relation of subordination. Plainly children almost always exist in a relation of subordination with respect to parents or guardians, and yet antagonisms only rarely here arise. Therefore Laclau and Mouffe more specifically suggest that they are interested in relations of oppression, which are “those relations of subordination which have transformed themselves into sites of antagonisms,” (153-154). Put differently, subordination is “constructed as oppression,” (154). It would seem that within this analysis, then, oppression is simply subordination misliked.298 In general, then, the democratic revolution might be summarized in these words of Tocqueville: “It is impossible to believe that equality will not finally penetrate as much into the political world as into other domains. It is not possible to conceive of men as eternally unequal among themselves on one point, and equal on others; at a certain moment, they will come to be equal on all points,” (quoted in Laclau and Mouffe, 156). One final point to note is that the democratic revolution in Laclau and Mouffe’s conception takes on a position of priority. In order to understand what I mean by this, consider the following example: “socialist demands should be seen as a moment internal to the democratic revolution,” and again later, “socialism is one of the components of a project for radical democracy, not vice versa,” (156, 178). The reason this must be so is now clear: because rupture might occur from anyplace within the social, because all articulations are ontologically equivalent, because the prior dominance of the class struggle

narrative has turned out in this analysis to be a hegemonic discourse and nothing more, class struggle logically becomes but one instance of the much broader “democratic revolution.” In practice, this democratic revolution is before us even now as the new social movements continue to proliferate, and we enter a social world where there is a corresponding movement for every conceivably political articulation.

From this description I hope that the basic contours of Laclau and Mouffe’s vision of the social are now clear. I shall now advance four criticisms of this vision.

**Four Criticisms of Laclau and Mouffe**

Here I will offer four criticisms of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory. First, I take issue with their conceptualization of class – I wish briefly to suggest that there is a reason, perhaps even a good reason, that orthodox Marxists were preoccupied with class and, therefore, with the proletariat. Second, I will note two ways in which it seems to me Laclau and Mouffe contradict themselves: first, their theory seems generalizable in a way that fixes the social from the outset even while rejecting the possibility of such a generalizable theory; second, their theory has an element of necessity to it even while clearly claiming that there is no necessity. Third, I will examine and critique the conceptualization of time in their analysis: in the words of Pickstock, Laclau and Mouffe “spatialize” time, thus eliminating, too hastily in my view, any role for eschatology, for surprise, and for the promise of the future. Fourth and finally, I will argue that Laclau and Mouffe’s vision of the social is one where the will dominates, and it is therefore nihilistic and also a mirror of the neoliberal capitalist world in which we find ourselves. Rather than mounting an assault upon neoliberal capitalism, Laclau and Mouffe in fact affirm this world in a profound way.
The issue of the centrality of class

One comes away from Laclau and Mouffe’s text believing that the orthodox Marxists’ obsession with class, with the centrality of the working class, with the historical destiny of the proletariat, is nothing more than an arbitrary prejudice. Karl Kautsky’s views on the matter are considered “extremely naïve and simplistic;” meanwhile, Plekhanov’s orthodox Marxism is considered to be too rigid (23-25). Indeed, orthodox Marxism relies, it seems, much too heavily on theory, so much so that “theory sets itself up as a guarantee that these tendencies [i.e. political developments] will eventually coincide with the type of social articulation proposed by the Marxist paradigm,” (19). In other words, in the midst of the growing fragmentation of the working class, orthodox Marxism served to promise that, despite appearances, Marxist prophecy would come to pass.

Now, I do not mean to suggest that Kautsky and Plekhanov were actually in the right. Doubtlessly, they were mistaken, and one only needs to read the critique of Laclau and Mouffe to understand this. Laclau and Mouffe’s diagnosis of the crisis of classical Marxism, to which orthodox Marxism constitutes a response, appears to me completely correct. This crisis has two facets to it: “the new awareness of the opacity of the social, of the complexities and resistances of an increasingly organized capitalism; and the fragmentation of the different positions of social agents which, according to the classical paradigm, should have united,” (18). Simply put, the social revolution was not unfolding the way it should have according to classical Marxism. Nevertheless, according to Laclau and Mouffe’s tale, orthodox Marxism stubbornly stuck to this failed script.
I am not presenting a defense of Marxism of any sort in this chapter, but on this issue of class I disagree with Laclau and Mouffe. Specifically, I do not think that it is fair to claim that Marxists like Kautsky and Plekhanov were simply dogmatic and guided by an arbitrary prejudice – and, again, this seems to be the narrative Laclau and Mouffe provide. Indeed, it is extremely significant that the latter never in fact present, much less refute, Marx’s own argument for why the proletariat is the “universal” class – or why, in other words, the emancipation of the proletariat is the key to universal human emancipation. Briefly, I read Marx’s argument as follows. First, man’s species character, its essential life activity, is “free, conscious activity.”\(^{299}\) The proletariat, then, is that class of society that possesses nothing but its own labor-power, and so it must sell this in order to live. The proletariat’s life activity, then, is precisely humanity’s life activity, but the proletariat pursues this activity in only an alienated way – the life activity of the species appears for it only as the means to life. Therefore in liberating itself from wage-labor, which is alienated labor, the proletariat paves the way for a universal emancipation, allowing humanity to live as humanity.\(^{300}\)

For the purposes of this chapter I have no need to take a position on the question of whether class is a social identity of particular importance. That is, I am not here claiming that Marx’s argument is correct. However, I am claiming that the argument is worth taking seriously, and to the extent that Laclau and Mouffe have not taken Marx’s basic argument seriously, their own argument suffers.

Two possible contradictions


I believe there are at least two possible contradictions in Laclau and Mouffe’s text. First, presumably Laclau and Mouffe believe they have provided an analysis of the social and of the antagonisms within it which may be described as “accurate” or “true.” Provided this minimal claim holds, then I argue their theory is self-contradictory. (Of course, if Laclau and Mouffe do not believe their analysis may be described as accurate or true, there are much more obvious problems with their text: why was it written? what is its purpose? and so forth). They wish to accord freedom a status of priority, claiming that any purported “ultimate foundation” of the social fails, since it must eventually face “the Rousseauian paradox according to which men should be obliged to be free,” (183). That is, the freedom of agents explodes any conception of an ultimate foundation of the social – as we have seen, any such positivity is always subvertible. Therefore it follows that “there has…disappeared the possibility of establishing a general theory of politics on the basis of topographical categories – that is to say, of categories which fix in a permanent manner the meaning of certain contents as differences which can be located within a relational complex,” (180). In other words, no general theory which posits a fixity to its contents, to what it describes, is possible. Therefore it also follows that no political concepts possess “absolute validity,” and, then, “the social is an infinitude not reducible to any underlying unitary principle,” (142, 139). Indeed, it seems that Laclau and Mouffe wish to claim that any totalizing vision of the social is ultimately illusory (see 100, 144).

However, is not their theory just such a totalizing vision? Is it not a general theory that fixes the social from the outset even while claiming to allow for an ever-open vision of the social? Any new political claim, movement, or form of resistance is almost effortlessly fit within the contours of this discursive, articulatory theory of the social. In this way, there is simply no way
outside of this theory – it is able, somewhat insidiously in my view, to capture any politics that tries to escape from it. Significantly, this is true even when agents fail completely to recognize themselves within the theory. We might consider for example the case of Christian fundamentalists. Let us suppose that Christian fundamentalists act in concert on some particular issue – say, putting on rallies and creating petitions opposed to same-sex marriage. If one were to say to this group, “surely you recognize that your claims possess no absolute validity whatsoever outside of the particular discursive situation in which you find yourselves,” the fundamentalists would dismiss this out of hand: in fact, they would claim, our claims possess absolute validity. Three points here are crucial. First, according to Laclau and Mouffe, the fundamentalists must misunderstand the nature of their own claims. This is not in itself objectionable, since this is only to say that political actors can be mistaken. However, second, any group whatsoever that insists their claims possess absolute validity must in principle be mistaken. This is particularly strange since political claims, insofar as they are persuasive claims, are also truth claims, and, as such, strive precisely for absolute validity. The Christian fundamentalists in the example above really do believe that they are in the right – so too does any political actor or group advancing truth claims. As Ronald Beiner puts it, “[s]urely, opinions persuade us when they offer grounds or intimate grounds for believing the truth of what is affirmed by those opinions as opposed to rival views.”

The third crucial point here is that while political actors are not able to make claims possessing absolute validity, and while other theories purporting to be a general theory of the social fail, Laclau and Mouffe’s claims logically possess absolute validity – their vision of the social is true not just today, but also tomorrow and henceforth – and their theory certainly seems to be a general theory, at least insofar as it nicely accounts for and explains all past, present, and future

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political activity. Laclau and Mouffe, in effect, seem able to stand outside of the somewhat chaotic social world of flux they describe.

The second possible contradiction in the text concerns the category of necessity. Laclau and Mouffe offer a theory that accords contingency a privileged position and, symmetrically, denigrates the category of necessity. Or rather, as they put it, “not only does the very category of necessity fall, but it is no longer possible to account for the hegemonic relation in terms of pure contingency, as the space which made intelligible the necessary/contingent opposition has dissolved,” (86). Presumably, they mean that contingency makes sense only when opposed to necessity, but because necessity is no more, neither is contingency. Nevertheless, contingency is affirmed later in the text (see 193). In any case, all possible semantic disputes aside, it is clear that necessity has no place in this theory – as Laclau and Mouffe put it, this category has fallen. Curiously, however, the category of necessity reappears, even after boldly dismissing it: “Of course, every project for radical democracy implies a socialist dimension, as it is necessary to put an end to capitalist relations of production, which are at the root of numerous relations of subordination,” (178). The reader is left wondering just why this is “necessary.” After all, we have already seen that antagonisms do not arise wherever relations of subordination exist – rather, this subordination must be “constructed as oppression” first, apparently through the willful action of the supposedly oppressed. Further, we have already seen, likewise, that any supposed centrality of capitalist relations of production is also a discursive construction, and not a necessary “truth.” Given these premises, is it not conceivable that the “democratic revolution” may proceed without abolishing capitalism? Is it not conceivable that capitalism may even prove to be a boon and not a hindrance to the eradication of certain relations of oppression?
As an example, let us return to the issue of the Indiana RFRA which I discussed in chapter two above. As I noted there, the Indiana RFRA sparked national outrage in the United States because it was perceived to allow openly for discrimination against gays and lesbians. Perhaps surprisingly, some of the fiercest opposition to the law came from financial powerhouses – Apple, Walmart, the NCAA, and numerous celebrities. With threats of moving valuable capital out of the state of Indiana and of boycotting the state in the future, then-governor Mike Pence was compelled eventually to revise the law. In this case, in other words, forces we might reasonably describe as “capitalist” contributed mightily to the revision of a law which was, in Laclau and Mouffe’s terminology, “constructed” as a vehicle of oppression. If the new social movements, the foot soldiers of the democratic revolution, acquire advantages from capitalism, if they find broad-based support especially or even primarily among wealthy political actors, then why should Laclau and Mouffe insist on the eradication of capitalism? It certainly does not seem “necessary” for the democratic revolution to oppose capitalism, and it may even be more consistent, on their account, to claim that rather than eradicating capitalism, we ought discursively to construct capitalism differently.

*The spatialization of time*

Laclau and Mouffe dismiss the notion of eschatology and political teleology (see 84, 168). There is no political destiny for society; there is no final stage we are approaching. Instead, “the discursive compass of the democratic revolution opens the way for political logics as diverse as right-wing populism and totalitarianism on the one hand, and a radical democracy on the other,”

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302 On this issue, see Patrick Deneen’s excellent article, “The Power Elite,” available online at <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2015/06/the-power-elite>. 
(168). The future is open, and anything, any hegemony, is possible. Yet for all this, I argue this future is not quite so open after all. In fact, we already know what the future will hold: endless contestation between different hegemonic articulations, one after the other, each one as unstable and incomplete as the last. A future characterized by harmony and peace is impossible in the theory of Laclau and Mouffe. Time is, rather, marked simply by the succession of different hegemonic articulations.

The RO theologian Catherine Pickstock refers to this dynamic whereby time is simply “filled” with fleeting events and phenomena as the spatialization of time.\(^\text{303}\) For her, this occurs once the political is “no longer situated within the eschatological dimension of time, but within an open-ended but empty and indifferent order of temporal successiveness.”\(^\text{304}\) I think this well describes the vision presented by Laclau and Mouffe. Granted, the latter are clearly partisans of their peculiar rendition of radical democracy, but ultimately, they can be nothing more than partisans, since in their analysis radical democracy is but another hegemonic discourse, destined in time to give way for another hegemonic discourse. Such spatialization of time constitutes what Pickstock refers to as our “unimportant liturgy;” it is our own empty yet repetitive ritual, whereby a barrage of “events” fills the empty space of time, a concept reduced to that void in which “things happen.”\(^\text{305}\) Thus, “when we think we speak or act with all the contingency of an open and temporal event, that contingency is choreographed in advance. There is no surprise: the indicative mood inscribes even the unknown.”\(^\text{306}\) In this manner, the future of the social in Laclau and Mouffe’s

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\(^{304}\) Ibid., 137.

\(^{305}\) Ibid., 93.

\(^{306}\) Ibid., 100.
theory, which appears at first glance to be entirely open, is reduced to sameness in advance. There is indeed contingency in this theory, but it is choreographed in advance.\(^{307}\)

Once again there seems to be a logic of capture in Laclau and Mouffe’s analysis, such that any possible novelty is in fact rationalized within their discursive system in advance of appearing. Contrary to their wishes, this theory begins to appear rather more closed than open.

*Capitalism and nihilism*

Tellingly, Laclau and Mouffe’s theory emphasizes the role of “collective will”: “Everything we have said so far…indicates that there are no privileged points for the unleashing of a socialist political practice; this hinges upon a ‘collective will’ that is laboriously constructed from a number of dissimilar points,” (87). Antagonisms themselves, of course, depend for their existence on nothing “objective” but, again, only on acts of the will. Indeed, there is no room for essences external to the will in this theory. As with Duns Scotus’s conceptualization of God, once essences are abolished, nothing then remains but the will itself.\(^{308}\) Laclau and Mouffe’s theory is one of endless competition between these “collective wills,” in a manner reminiscent of Thrasymachus’s assault on justice in *Republic* or, more recently, of Nietzsche’s philosophy of the will to power. In the words of Foucault, here justice is a matter of power — politics is war by other means.\(^{309}\) Operating in a world of objective meaninglessness (193), these collective wills engage in struggles and thereby construct meaning *ex nihilo.*

\(^{307}\) As I will show below, for Pickstock the future is in principle open thanks to the plenitudinous character of the divine.


\(^{309}\) See Foucault, “Truth and Power,” 64.
The first point to make is that this vision of the social is remarkably in keeping with the dominant vision of neoliberal capitalism. This vision gives pride of place to competition between social agents for apparently scarce resources. In a manner remarkably similar to Laclau and Mouffé’s vision, neoliberalism is ordered social strife – a savage contest in which there are clear winners and clearer losers. As Marx put it (though he seems to have celebrated it), under capitalism, “all that is solid melts into air.” So too in Laclau and Mouffé’s theory solidity passes away, melting into the shifting, discursive world of essential flux.

At times, it is worth noting, the secret links between Laclau and Mouffé’s theory and the reality of neoliberal capitalism become clear enough that it is hardly accurate to call them secretive. For instance, Laclau and Mouffé note that within the “new antagonisms” of the democratic revolution, “there is an identifiable tendency towards the valorization of ‘differences’ and the creation of new identities which tend to privilege ‘cultural’ criteria (clothes, music, language, regional traditions, and so on),” (164). While they account for this tendency by declaring that these social movements “bestow an increasingly central role upon liberty” (164), it seems to me that these social movements in fact mirror the vicissitudes of the market. Like these movements, the market values difference – indeed, the virtue of the market is the remarkable range of desires it satisfies, and if a desire happens not to be satisfied, then soon enough a niche market will come to be. Like these movements, the market thrives upon the generation of new identities, each expressed through particular manners of dress, particular tastes in music and other entertainment, and particular linguistic and geographical preferences. Further, demands for democratization are not necessarily contrary to deepening marketization: Allan Bloom, for instance, persuasively makes

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310 I mean this term in the sense Wendy Brown employs. See Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*, chap. 3.

the case that the demands of students in the 1960s for the democratization of the university culminated in what we might today call the neoliberalization of the university.

As neoliberal capitalism continues to profane all things holy, we are more and more left in a kind of nihilistic abyss. Out of this nothing emerge the differences of the market, seeking always to satisfy new desires for those who can afford it. Likewise, in Laclau and Mouffe’s theory, a plurality of articulations emerge from nothing, showing the oft-neglected fecundity of nihilism. The social logics of both neoliberal capitalism and the theory of Laclau and Mouffe are nihilistic in the precise ontological sense: what there is, is nothing, out of which emerge a great many apparent somethings which, in due time, reveal themselves after all to be nothing, or to be wholly empty, entirely superficial.

In a later commentary, Laclau and Mouffe argue against the conclusion that their theory is nihilistic in this way: “Even if we cannot decide algorithmically about many things, this does not mean that we are confined to total nihilism, since we can reason about the verisimilitude of the available alternatives.” Verisimilitude is apparently related to Truth as Aristotle’s conception of phronesis is to his conception of theory. Now, whether it is accurate to claim that we can simply and cleanly separate phronesis from theory in Aristotle’s philosophy is, to say the least, highly dubious, but I shall leave this matter aside. The meaning of Laclau and Mouffe’s claim about “verisimilitude” is not clear here, but their more general view is clarified somewhat in a latter passage in the same paragraph: “the first condition of a radically democratic society is to accept the contingent and radically open character of all its values.” Yet, in my meaning, if values all possess a “radically open character,” then it follows that nihilism holds, since what this means is

312 Laclau and Mouffe, “Post-Marxism without Apologies,” 102.
that the content of values is in actuality, in truth, empty – only thusly may this radical openness hold, at least if this means that the meaning and priority of values is essentially unstable and constantly (and necessarily) in flux.

It is not at all obvious that nihilism is simply a “bad thing” – indeed, Milbank notes that we may only reject nihilism with great difficulty.\textsuperscript{315} However, it seems to me that a nihilistic social theory is unable to surmount a powerful challenge to neoliberal capitalism, especially because the latter is thoroughly nihilistic. It strikes me as much more likely that a nihilistic theory will in the end mirror the very capitalist order it ostensibly seeks to overcome. My view is that this is precisely what befalls Laclau and Mouffe.

Next we shall turn to Milbank’s socialist vision, which, I argue, does not suffer from the same pitfalls as Laclau and Mouffe’s. Most importantly, I argue that Milbank provides us with a non-nihilistic account of socialism.

\textbf{Socialism by Grace: Milbank}

For the above reasons we must ultimately reject the post-Marxist vision of Laclau and Mouffe. Yet by no means is this to say that we must therefore accept capitalism! Rather, we must think the problem of capitalism and the answer of socialism in a new way. I do not doubt there are perhaps many ways so to rethink these issues, but here I am interested in a Christian socialism. This is not simply a random choice; rather, as will become clear shortly, I think there are good reasons to turn to the Christian tradition, especially as thought by the school of Radical Orthodoxy, to rethink resistance to capitalism and the theorization of socialism.

\textsuperscript{315} See Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason}, xiii–xxii.
In this section I will examine in particular John Milbank’s rendition of Christian socialism, or, as he refers to it, socialism by grace. In my analysis of Milbank’s “socialism by grace,” I will ask and answer three distinct questions of tremendous significance for this chapter. As I set them out at the outset of this essay, these questions are as follows. First, what is the matter with secular variants of socialism, and why must we therefore seek a theological, Christian socialism? Second, what might be the basis of this socialism? And third, what might such a socialism look like? Finally, in section four of this essay I will suggest that Milbank’s vision relies (as he himself doubtlessly would agree) on a logic or way of being-in-the-world that is entirely other than the capitalistic, immanentist logic or way of being-in-the-world which reigns supreme today. This alternative way of being-in-the-world I call liturgical or Eucharistic (following Catherine Pickstock and William T. Cavanaugh respectively), because it is upon the revolutionary logic of the Eucharist that the Christian socialist vision most fundamentally is based.

Why not secular socialism?

What we shall find is that, if Milbank is correct, then the criticisms of Laclau and Mouffe above are true also of every variant of secular socialism. This is because the shortcomings are not with this or that theorist but with secularity itself.

For Milbank, socialism is itself “an originally mainly Christian concept” which was “later appropriated by German atheists, with the unfortunate consequence that the Church then pursued in reaction to this development unfortunate hybrids of the Christian socialist legacy with market

\[316\] It is well worth emphasizing that I will not in this chapter consider other theologies and their socialisms (e.g., Judaism, Islam, etc.). I suspect such theologies are as capable as Christianity of supporting socialism, but I must here leave this only as a wager and nothing more. Milbank himself seems to share such a wager; see Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon (New York: Routledge, 2003), 175.
liberalism and traditionalist reaction.”³¹⁷ Milbank often cites (non-Marxist) Christian British socialists like John Ruskin when making the argument that socialism was originally conceived of as a conservative, counter-Enlightenment, and most importantly Christian idea.³¹⁸ Nevertheless, as Milbank notes, such a Christianity is certainly not the norm today. Rather, many observers are likely far more accustomed to the perhaps reactionary Church which Milbank describes, one which firmly condemns socialism. We might consider in this respect the famous 1891 papal encyclical known as “Rerum Novarum,” a piece that, despite its many merits, does not veil in the least its anti-socialism.³¹⁹ In light of the anti-socialism of at least many actors in the Christian church, here understood in its broader, universal meaning (i.e., beyond the institution of the Roman Catholic Church), the contemporary socialist is right to ask why we ought to turn to Christianity to rejuvenate socialism in the 21st century, as adherents of Radical Orthodoxy suggest. Surely the tradition of Christian socialism in Europe pales in comparison to the rather more conservative leanings of the broader Christian church, after all.

First, I would be remiss not to underscore that the historical situation in which the Left finds itself renders a turn to the Christian tradition especially attractive. This is precisely the suggestion of Graham Ward: “In the collapse of socialism as a secular political force I see Radical Orthodoxy as offering one means whereby socialism can be returned to its Christian roots.”³²⁰ Like many post-Marxist socialists (including Laclau and Mouffe), Ward conceives of the collapse of

³¹⁷ Milbank, Being Reconciled, 162.
³¹⁹ See Pope Leo XIII, “Rerum Novarum,” in Proclaiming Justice & Peace: Papal Documents from Rerum Novarum to Centesimus Annus, ed. Michael Walsh and Brian Davies, n.d., 18–21. I should add that it is in my view understandable for the Roman Catholic Church to condemn socialism in 1891, a time when socialism was manifestly atheistic in character. Further, I wish to state clearly that I believe Rerum Novarum to be, in most respects, a commendable, wise document. Here I only call attention to its obvious anti-socialist bent.
secular socialism in the wake of 1989 as a political opportunity, an opening for a more humane socialism to come to the fore. This strikes me as a correct assessment, generally. That is, it seems to me likely that secular socialism as it existed in the 19th and 20th centuries is all but dead as an active political force in the West. Furthermore, Ward is correct in my view that Christianity might serve to rejuvenate the socialist project (for reasons which shall hopefully be made clear by the conclusion of this essay). Nevertheless, I think there is need to be cautious here. It would not do to claim that we ought to turn to Christian socialism only because the historical, political moment shows that such a turning might be politically advantageous – that is, we must not instrumentalize Christianity. Milbank calls attention to this worry:

*Theology and Social Theory* was written in the middle of the Thatcherite era, out of the conviction that a theological vision alone could challenge the emerging hegemony of neo-liberalism. This did not mean, as some of suggested, that I thought to instrumentalize theology and religion. To the contrary, I sought to show why, for reasons quite exceeding the political, a Catholic Christian account of reality might be entertained as the most finally persuasive one.

In other words, Milbank does not claim that he argues from a Christian perspective because this perspective offers a strategic advantage in a struggle against neoliberalism. The claim is very much the reverse: that Christianity might contribute to a socialist critique stems from the larger belief that the Christian account of reality is the most persuasive one. In other words, its potential political effectiveness in the end evinces its truth (note that Milbank claims Christianity to be persuasive for reasons exceeding and yet not thereby excepting political reasons).

Second, following Milbank, it is perhaps time to consider whether secular variants of socialism are not perhaps dead ends for radical political thought. In other words, I mean to suggest, with Milbank, that there are good philosophical arguments to be made against the viability of secular socialist thought generally. For supposing one adopts an atheist outlook in conjunction

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321 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, xi.
with socialist political commitments – as has been the norm for the last 150 years or so – then upon what might one construct one’s political vision? A few possible answers emerge. One possible answer is pure reason. Today this might strike us as something of an archaic answer, yet it is not to be dismissed merely because it is old. Milbank criticizes efforts to ground socialism in principles deriving from pure reason, “[f]or the problem about pure reason is that it brutally abstracts from all specificity and ineffable attachment, and although its global regime may be sustainable unto delirium, it also destroys the common run of human well-being and motivation. In general it induces a schizoid cynicism.”

Is this criticism fair? Or is it hasty, and malicious, and all-too-generalized?

It is worth reflecting first on Milbank’s idea that the abstracting power of pure reason eventually destroys human motivation. In other words, Milbank claims pure reason constitutes an assault upon all particular reasons one might have for taking concerted action – action done always in the name of some vision of the good. Once such a vision evaporates, so too may evaporate meaningful action. As Leo Strauss puts it, once we realize the principles of our actions are in fact empty, “we cannot wholeheartedly act upon them anymore.” Is it the case, then, that contemporary secular socialists lack conviction and, therefore, motivation? This is certainly the picture that Jodi Dean seems to paint. Following the 2000 election debacle, Dean suggests the lack of visible outrage from the left was telling: “Lack of faith in Gore did not lead the left to concede defeat. We lacked something in ourselves. Call it faith, conviction, resolve – even the very notion of an ‘ourselves’ that could be or be called a ‘we.’” A few years later Dean restates wonderfully

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323 Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 6. Admittedly, Strauss is one theorist whom Milbank would doubtlessly claim is taken by “pure reason.” Nevertheless, the point I wish to make here is that Strauss shows us wonderfully that action taken in the name of nothing eventually ceases – for one does not act in the name of nothing. The difference between Strauss and Milbank is that while the former believes pure reason is the proper means of philosophizing politically, the latter sees pure reason itself as a veiled nothing – a shadow without a casting body.
324 Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*, 3.
her indictment of the political left: “The Left failed to defend a vision of a better world, an egalitarian world of common production by and for the collective people. Instead, it accommodated capital, succumbing to the lures of individualism, consumerism, competition, and privilege, and proceeding as if there really were no alternative to states that rule in the interests of markets.”

According to Dean, the left, that force which has long carried the torch of socialism, has so lost its convictions that it has become one more vehicle for the interests of global capital.

I wish to make two further points before concluding this minor digression and returning to a discussion of Milbank. The first is that Dean’s diagnosis of the crisis of the left – specifically that it has failed to defend its own vision of the good and, worse still, that it has ceased to believe in itself – is far from unique to Dean. It is rather commonplace today.

However, is it not the case that much of the contemporary radical left, following the French poststructuralists, rejects any claim of access to pure reason, affirming instead a pluralist vision of the social defined by essential flux (a vision similar to that of Laclau and Mouffe, as detailed above)? This is perhaps true, but Milbank is equally critical of this kind of vision: “If one is resigned to mere postmodern…pluralism, then it is inevitably true that at the meta-level what rules is the purest, most spatialized abstraction. And it is exactly this abstraction which…is responsible for the most ruthless and globalizing drive for profits.”

We have already seen above that Laclau and Mouffe’s theory indeed falls into this trap of ruthless abstraction, as all particularity is, as I put it, captured by their discourse analysis. Therefore I do not wish to dwell on this here. It is crucial however to note that in this important respect postmodern or poststructuralist accounts do

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325 Dean, The Communist Horizon, 15.
327 Milbank, Being Reconciled, 173.
not differ markedly from the older “Enlightenment” accounts they often purport to replace or improve upon. As Milbank notes regarding Enlightenment-style humanisms, “detached from all attachments, such humanisms inevitably land up destroying every attachment as too tinged with the arbitrary, in the name of the black sun of nihilism itself: that absolute transcendental arbitrariness, which, within an arbitrary economy, is alone ‘non-arbitrary.’”

Indeed, whether modern or postmodern, conceptions of the social tend after all step closer and closer back toward an elevation of pure reason alone, flattening or deflating all particularity in the process. The difference, of course, is that postmodern accounts tend to construe pure reason too as one illusion among many. Thus, in either modern or postmodern accounts of the social or political, as ideals lose “their theological and teleological ground, their character as ideals becomes distorted, and, in consequence, eventually cease to be credible. Freedom becomes freedom without point, freedom for futility.”

Thus, the sounding death knell of secular socialism is the inability to breathe life into just those ideals it seeks to further: liberty, equality, and fraternity – ideals still yet to be realized, from a socialist perspective, and yet ideals which, according to Milbank, today become more and more “merely” ideals, empty manifestations of will and power, and nothing more. In short, then, secular socialism, shorn of the theological and teleological logics by which its virtues became virtues, becomes hopelessly nihilistic, unable fully to defend that in which it believes – unable to fully provide an account for why it believes what it believes. Milbank suggests that “we are now bound to ask whether capitalism is not the definitive shape of secularity, and whether by contrast

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328 Ibid.
329 On the ultimate sameness of modernity and postmodernity, see Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 262ff.
330 Milbank, “The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy,” 45.
331 Of course, here I am following a line of thought indebted to Alasdair MacIntyre. See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd Edition (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2007).
The question we must raise, in other words, is whether or not secularism and capitalism are but two sides of the same rotten coin. Following Milbank and other radically orthodox theologians, we shall wager that the answer to this question is yes. This is an exploratory line of thought – what might happen if we reject secularism in total? Next, I will show the theoretical basis of Milbank’s orthodox Christian rendition of socialism, namely universal gift. Then I will detail what this novel (yet old) vision of socialism might look like.

**Universal gift as basis for socialism**

Milbank calls his vision of socialism, “socialism by grace.” By this he means that the basic social logic of this vision is centered on the role of the universal gift, as opposed to the present capitalist logic of the contract or the commodity. The mythos of the universal gift constitutes for Milbank an entirely different logos from the logos which dominates under capitalism. Milbank describes the universal gift in the following way:

We would have to name it universal gift. Instead of the treating of even neighbours as aliens (though this was transcended even in primitive societies in the case of guest rituals) one would substitute the treating of even aliens – when encountered – as neighbours: a universal practice of offering, a universal offering in the expectation or at least hope of receiving back not a price due to us, but others themselves in their counter-gifts, because we aim for reciprocity, for community, and not for a barren and sterile self-sacrifice.  

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333 It is worth emphasizing that the idea of challenging the capitalist logos of the contract is not foreign in the least to Catholic social teaching. See Pope Leo XIII, “Rerum Novarum,” 33–34.
Here Milbank takes to task models of ethics such as that of Levinas which, he claims, take the form of total self-alienation, even unto death – a complete self-sacrifice without reciprocity. In Milbank’s vision of the gift, reciprocity is central: we freely give to others in the expectation of receiving freely back precisely what we have given. This, then, is a logic of “free-association, or relational unity with the other, whose near-oxymoronic character allows it to be brought into conjunction with the gift, which is somehow at once free in relation to and yet also bound to the other.”  

This seems like too much to ask of one another though. Surely it is not reasonable to expect strangers to treat one another as friends, or to the one to enter into a relationship with the other that is at once completely free and also characterized by something that looks much like duty. In other words, it seems that Milbank’s vision is idealistic in the extreme – a beautiful theory which is utterly impossible in practice. How could it be otherwise?

I will make two points in response. First, Milbank seems to be aware how demanding is his logic of the universal gift.  

Second, Milbank is clear that transcendence “alone can mythically and rationally sustain the ‘universal gift.’”  

Why is there a need for transcendence in order to sustain the logic of the universal gift? Milbank first suggests that “the pre-condition for collective solidarity and just redistribution beyond the liberal formalities of respect for person and property must be some kind of collective and supra-rational devotion.”  

In one sense, this notion is more historical than theoretical – the history of the early centuries of Christianity, for instance, provides some idea of the material import of the idea of humanity made in the image of God.  

Additionally, Milbank notes that “all societies retain some such devotion, but where it is

335 Ibid.  
337 Milbank, Being Reconciled, 171.  
338 Ibid., 176.  
marginalized, it tends to become debased and fanaticized, so that should it ever erupt once more into the centre [sic], the consequences are likely to be (and were in the last century) diabolical.”

Therefore, if Milbank is correct that there is a need for transcendence in order to support the idea of the universal gift, we must ask what kind of transcendence – and corresponding devotion – is required. Milbank’s conception is, unsurprisingly, Pauline: “transcendence offers a thought of the universal not as something clearly grasped, spatially fixed and operable, but rather as something eternally present yet not fully accessible. This universal is instead only available as diversely mediated by local pathways.” In other words, the transcendence favored by Milbank is just the transcendence offered by orthodox Christianity. Here the transcendent universal is always everywhere present and yet not for that reason fully grasped or understood. Rather, an element of mystery perennially remains – the infinite is unable to be captured fully by the finite mind. Yet, conversely, the infinite cannot swallow the finite, for the infinite reveals itself through the finite.

Here once again we recognize Milbank’s insistence on a theology of participation, in which creation is imbued with divinity by virtue of being creation – that is, God is with us, always, and God is everywhere.

What does this socialism look like?

Milbank calls his favored politics “a politics of time.” This politics “would insist on the priority of the other-worldly as the pre-condition of justice.” In place of the secular spatialization of time, in which a void is simply filled with events, in Milbank’s conception “what passes is

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340 Milbank, Being Reconciled, 176.
342 See Romans 1:20.
343 Milbank, Being Reconciled, 177.
allowed to pass well, and where one rejoices in its passing, since only such passing allows us to construe the world as a continuous theme or tune, as Augustine insisted.⁴⁴ This assimilation of the political to harmony certainly presents a contrast with the secular conceptions of which Milbank is so ruthlessly critical. Rather than envisaging a future in which everything constantly changes and, therefore, everything stays the same, or a future already known as contingent, fleeting, and ultimately futile, here the world as a whole, past, present, and future, is seen as musical. In music, difference is not absent, for if it were melody would be nonexistent. Rather, differences within music are set forth within a common theme, providing music with its harmony. Unharmonious music is most often displeasing to the ears, while the most harmonious music arranges different notes in such a way as to paint a vivid image of a whole.⁴⁵

What gives the passing of social and political life its potentially harmonious quality? Milbank explains:

A politics of time, therefore, seeks first of all to ritualize life as passage, in order to capture in the lineaments of passage certain traces of the eternal. In this fashion it is fundamentally liturgical. Secondly, it insists that this eternal is alone what we individually possess and possess in common, like light, which we all see together and yet from singular perspectives. Thirdly, it recognizes that government by the eternal is at once heteronomous and autonomous: ‘middle voiced’ as Pickstock puts it. More concretely, we can now recognize these three components as festival, education and profession. These are the ‘three modes of liturgical order’.⁴⁷

In other words, what provides this politics of time with harmony are “traces” of the eternal. A politics of time seeks always to make what is implicit – divinity – explicit, and this necessitates political action. In what follows I will briefly discuss each of the three modes of liturgical order that Milbank mentions, beginning with festival.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 178.
⁴⁵ On the relation of music and politics, see Pickstock, “Music: Soul, City and Cosmos after Augustine.”
⁴⁶ It must be emphasized that from an orthodox Christian perspective this lovely vision of harmony can only be a potentiality at present. This is because the world is a fallen world, rife with sin.
⁴⁷ Milbank, Being Reconciled, 180.
With the various orgies of consumptive energy definitive of a calendar year in the United States (e.g. Valentine’s Day, Easter, and above all Christmas), it may seem as if emphasizing the importance of festival were the least of concerns. Milbank believes this is not so. For Milbank, giving and festival belong together: “Giving, therefore, is primarily a matter of shared expenditure and celebration. ‘Primitive’ societies know this, and group themselves around such ecstatic transition, not around accumulated illusions.”

Things today have changed, and perhaps not for the better: “In modernity, by contrast, without a collective understanding of why things pass…and a public celebration of this passing, there increasingly are no public, central spaces – which are always…marked by tombs ornamenting death, and towers narrowing upwards” The spaces of public festival, through which Milbank’s “traces of the eternal” might be envisaged, are, he suggests, fewer and fewer in number, and rarer and rarer.

Milbank suggests elsewhere that in fact capitalism is diametrically opposed to festival: “If…the citizens of New York chose to run their city according to that liturgical order which its gothic skyscrapers so strangely intimate (indeed Manhattan constitutes one gigantic cathedral-castle) with a third of the days off a year for worship and feasting, neither State nor market would permit this.” I add this simply to suggest there are good reasons for believing, along with Milbank, that capitalism runs opposed to an order in which festival constitutes a central category.

Milbank’s second mode of liturgical order is education. In Milbank’s conception, education is conceived teleologically but not instrumentally, and, surprisingly, it constitutes something of a central category:

Within a spatialized politics (common to both right and left), it is assumed that education is only a temporal instrument which subserves a spatial outcome that

348 Ibid., 181.
349 Ibid.
is political, social, economic and technological. Broadly speaking, this renders education but one field within the space of the political. However, from the perspective of a politics of time, it is rather that the political (and the social, economic and technological) is but a moment of the pedagogic…This is because the point of human life is taken to be ultimately theoria, or the contemplation of the eternal. Therefore the whole of life is regarded as a reception and a learning.\textsuperscript{351}

Milbank here thinks of himself as setting forth an alternative to the manner in which education is conceived in the secular politics of right and left. While for the latter, Milbank suggests, education too often constitutes only a means to an end – whether the end of the market or the end of citizenship, he conceives of education instead quite broadly, such that political, social, and economic life are moments of the former. One might say that, for Milbank, these latter three are best conceived as opportunities for an education which is in principle without end, since education most properly means for him contemplation of the eternal – or as he puts it later, “the point of education is self-abasement before the ineffable – what is known is always governed by mystery, primarily.”\textsuperscript{352} I want to suggest that what Milbank is thinking here is really quite interesting for the purposes of thinking about a socialist politics, because what he desires is to establish a higher end than these worldly categories, to which they ought to conform. The necessity of a socialist politics is argued here primarily through contending that the most appropriate Christian practice, which is to conceive all of human practice liturgically and, therefore, also pedagogically, is inconsistent with capitalism.

It is perhaps clearer that the first two modes of liturgical order, festival and education, constitute for our capitalist society skandala which necessarily become warped and hollow in this world. But is it not true that capitalism puts a premium on matters of professionalism? Is it not true, for instance, that a hallmark of neoliberal capitalism is the development of intense norms of

\textsuperscript{351} Milbank, \textit{Being Reconciled}, 182.
\textsuperscript{352} Ibid., 183–84.
professionalization, which develop hand in hand with the increasing specialization of labor, and also with the maintenance of an army of surplus labor, helping to render professional occupations increasingly precarious (of course, it is also true that precarity is a sign of the power of capital relative to labor)?

Milbank contends otherwise, that the concept of profession might actually be thought of as conducive and even central to a socialist politics. How can this be? First we should attend to Milbank’s characteristically theological conception of profession: “where devotion to transcendent value is instilled, one has the possibility of self-regulation that necessarily includes an internalized sense of the role of practice…One can call such devotion, such virtue ‘professionalism’, provided one prescinds from some of the usual connotations of this word, possessing a bureaucratic flavor.” While this conception has something in common with the professionalism of neoliberalism, especially the importance of “self-regulation” or discipline oriented toward a specialized practice, here again Milbank’s introduction of a divine telos rather changes matters. For if one’s profession must be devoted to the “transcendent,” then, Milbank suggests, it cannot be devoted also to rival gods, especially the gods of the marketplace.

In order to flesh this out somewhat, and also to tie the notion of professionalism to that of gift, which I noted above is central, Milbank considers “the example of medicine: medical doctors do not normally and as a rule (at least in Europe) pursue money alone, because they would despise themselves, and others would despise them, if they did so…he goes with what he does, becomes the gifts he bestows…the idea of the profession continues to be bound up with the notion of the

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353 The best work I have come across on the concept of precarious labor is Guy Standing, The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014) There Standing notes the precariatizing effect of the stupendous growth of the global labor market, especially but certainly not only upon labor in the developed world. Increased competition, he suggests, has given capitalists greater power and made labor less secure.

354 Milbank, Being Reconciled, 184.
There is almost a properly Marxian air to this suggestion, which Milbank might well not oppose in the least. What I mean is that, what Milbank seems to be saying is that his more Christian socialist rendering of professionalism is not after all totally alien to today’s society (just as, for Marx, the future socialist society was based on observed social realities here and now), but instead even today professionalism at its best hovers close to his ideal. As he suggests, a medical doctor who pursued only money and abandoned totally the Hippocratic Oath to care for the sick and so forth would be met with utter disdain. Indeed, that doctors “worship” ultimately that oath over and above their paychecks gives some credence to Milbank’s contention that orienting one’s profession to the eternal seems to conflict with how professionalism is too often conceived today – instrumentally as a means to money. His suggestion in brief seems to be for us to imagine a world in which other professions – the shopkeeper, the banker, the politician, etc. – were oriented ultimately beyond a profit motive: “The point for socialism is not (at least primarily) to ‘limit’ the market, but rather to reconstrue exchange according to the protocols of a universal gift-exchange: that is to say, in every negotiated transaction, something other than profit and loss must be at issue.” Thus part of what Milbank is up to here is to contend that socialism requires that we elevate some conception of the good above that of money and profit.

Incidentally, I think part of what this means is that, at least for Milbank, paradoxically, true professionalism is in fact threatened by neoliberal capitalism, understood as the shaping of all contrary social logics in accord with the profit-based logic of the market. Consider, for instance, Milbank’s contention that “[f]or academics in universities, the end of the Middle Ages is occurring only now, with the perversion of knowledge into a commodity for consumption.”

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355 Ibid.
356 Ibid., 186.
professionalization has perhaps never been forged so intensely and rigorously as today in the academy, there is nevertheless a sense that something vital has been lost.

Milbank therefore concludes surprisingly that “what is essential for syndicalism is some kind of professional ethos, as recommended by John Ruskin and the guild socialist tradition; some sense that that which is produced is primarily a gift to the community which will relate to community values in crucially important ways.” What we require, in brief, is a strong sense of goods other than profit – real goods, anchored to the transcendent, which are for just that reason not empty but abounding. Can such a sense be inculcated in some irreligious, totally secular fashion? To this question Milbank’s response is, I think, simply that he thinks it is quite doubtful, because, once again, in order to counter capitalism, he is, as we have seen throughout the dissertation, insistent on the need for a meaningful counter-narrative, and secular socialism seems increasingly unable to supply precisely that today.

As is perhaps implied in the foregoing, Milbank’s socialism is a socialism of virtue. What does this mean? As he explains, “[f]or a polity based on virtue, the goal of authority is not simply an effective peace and order, nor the representation of majority will, nor the liberty and equality of individuals, but rather the education of individuals into certain practices and states of character, regarded as objectively desirable goals for human beings as such.” The practices I have discussed here, festival, education, and profession, constitute examples of practices Milbank finds objectively desirable, because he conceives them as oriented toward the eternal, and, to stress the point again, he contends they are central categories for a socialist politics.

Conclusion

358 Milbank, Being Reconciled, 185.
359 Milbank, Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason, 327.
After this analysis I am now in a position to restate the three guiding questions with which I opened this chapter: First, why does RO promote socialism as a politics proper to Christianity? Second, how is RO’s socialism distinguished from contemporary secular conceptions? Third, why might we favor RO’s conception of socialism in our historical moment? That is, what makes RO’s socialism especially attractive today?

First, for Milbank and other RO scholars, notably Pickstock, capitalism represents a particular form of capture of time, and a de-emphasis on sacrality. Additionally one of Milbank’s claims, and I share it, is it is not for nothing that Milbank suggests “that insofar as it [is] a culturally all-embracing system of signification, capitalism is somewhat like a religion.” In his reading of Christianity Milbank finds another “all-embracing system of signification,” one which, as we have seen, in fact rules out certain modes of life taken for granted under capitalism, such as the subservience of human life to the machinations of the market. Thus Milbank begins not with socialism understood in isolation but rather with theology, and from his theology, he concludes that capitalism is in important ways unjust, and for a Christian politics, socialism is necessary.

Second, RO’s conception of socialism differs from secular conceptions through its insistence on the centrality of the Christian story and the grounding of socialism in the eternal. This is perhaps obvious: after all, RO offers a Christian socialism. Yet the suggestion made here, following Milbank and others, is that Christianity may in fact contribute something very important to socialist politics, and, at the very least, the former should not be quickly or easily jettisoned. With respect to radical democracy and its conception of socialism, as read through Laclau and

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360 Ibid., 198.
Mouffe, in particular, I have throughout this chapter presented doubts that it provides reasons for favoring socialism that are as strong as those of Milbank and company.

Third, at least one reason we might favor RO’s rendition of socialism and the critique of capitalism today is that secular socialisms continue to find themselves in an impasse, in part, I argue, because they simply cannot speak meaningfully or coherently of the human good. Socialism does not make sense except in the context of an argument that it is more just than capitalism. However, to hearken back to the beginning of the dissertation, it is, I think, really quite difficult coherently to make that claim – so difficult, in fact, that I think it is sensible to introduce an explicitly theological vision like that of RO in order successfully to make it.
CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I have attempted to argue that Radical Orthodoxy presents a better account – of ontology, secularism (and its critique), judgment, and socialism – than do the thinkers I have termed radical democrats. Now I wish to conclude briefly by reflecting first on the shortcomings of RO itself and second on how I see this project relating to the tumultuous state of politics in the USA and the broader Western world.

Milbank believes, first, that “theology…is the only possible source for a political critique which claims to be grounded in ‘truth,’” and, second, that “the Catholic vision of ontological peace now provides the only alternative to a nihilistic outlook.”361 This strikes me as precisely the sort of hubris of which he accuses Hegel.362 Whereas Milbank claims “only” his Catholic vision will do, I want to claim something far humbler: the Catholic vision of ontological peace is superior to the nihilistic vision of radical democrats. This does not mean that Milbank is wrong to see Catholic Christianity as one promising alternative to nihilism, but it strikes me as hubris to claim it is the only one, especially absent the extremely important work of comparison in which Milbank is engaged in Theology and Social Theory. Or perhaps another way of putting the matter: the exercise in which both Milbank and I are engaged cannot be a final theory of everything for the simple reason that Milbank has persuasively shown that there are no such final theories. Thus, when Milbank claims that only his Catholic account will do, he is guilty of hubris precisely because his method, so to speak, precludes such a conclusion, as I shall show presently.

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361 Ibid., 176, 442.
362 Ibid., 161.
Rather than contend, a priori, that RO’s Christian vision is the only possibly adequate one, I think it makes more sense to heed once more Milbank’s own words: “the only possible response to nihilism is to affirm one’s allegiance to a particular tradition, and derive an ontology from assumptions of its narrative forms.”\textsuperscript{363} This passage describes well what I meant above when I spoke of Milbank’s “method”. I understand the method as claiming in part that one must begin where one finds oneself. For the Muslim or the Buddhist, it simply makes more sense to begin social critique from those traditions, rather than necessitating Christianity in order to see the light. Now, I am not saying that a discussion among and between traditions is useless – indeed, I believe I have been engaged myself in such a discussion in this work. However, in order to get such a discussion going, two insights are crucial. The first is that we are always already operating within a tradition, understood as a story, however rough, which has been passed down to us. The second is that one task which confronts us in a postmodern, nihilistic age is, I think, carefully to attend to the tradition in which one finds oneself. Perhaps what I am suggesting here is nothing more than a kind of conservative disposition in Oakeshott’s sense. What this means with respect to Milbank in particular and RO more generally, however, is that his hubris simply will not do. As he suggests in other places, we should indeed conceive of Christianity as one perspective among others, albeit a perspective which has historical and cultural importance in the West and which also has an often overlooked narrative coherence, and, more simply, many attractive features.

Finally, how does this work relate to the tumultuous politics of recent years, and 2016 in particular? We have not seen, nor do I expect we shall see, a stirring reprisal of Christian socialism, which might emerge heroically to confront and finally abolish capitalism (but these days it seems anything is possible). Instead in recent years we have witnessed the rise once again of right-wing

\textsuperscript{363} Ibid., 262.
populism, in the USA, in Western Europe, in Russia, in the Philippines, and elsewhere. This populism is associated with names very familiar to us today: Trump, Farage, Le Pen, Wilders, Putin, Duterte, among others. Because of the explicit aim of this populism to undo long established features of the post-war capitalist order, many understandably meet it with fear, suspicion, and outright hostility. Indeed, one might challenge oneself to collect all the editorials and essays which have attempted somehow to diagnose the rise of this apparently malign politics in the last year or so – their number is extraordinary. Can the work which I have pursued here shed any possible light on this new political phenomenon?

I think it can shed at least a little light, but perhaps not much. With Milbank I have throughout emphasized the importance of stories and narratives. As Richard Kearney among many other commentators have argued, we fundamentally understand the world not through some list of purportedly neutral facts – that which is “simply given,” – but, much more fundamentally and importantly, we understand our world through the stories we tell about it.\textsuperscript{364} Milbank himself stresses, as I have shown, that he embarks on his political theological endeavor in part because he is convinced that the best critique of the dominant story of today must itself be another story. Now, what is right-wing populism itself but a story advanced against the prevailing neoliberal order? Where the latter emphasizes fluid borders – at least for commodities – and globalism, populism emphasizes instead the old story of ethnonationalism. Where neoliberalism increasingly emphasizes the good of difference, populism emphasizes instead a vision of the good of homogeneity which strikes many of us, especially in academic circles, as hopelessly archaic and racist. And whereas neoliberalism presents to us a story in which all once-firm bonds of solidarity melt hopelessly into thin air, populism reaffirms once more old ideals of national and ethnic

belonging and meaning. As neoliberal capitalism furiously upends old orders and a shadow of insecurity stretches over the whole world, it should perhaps not come as a shock to us that many seek solace in a story which promises to restore the rhythms and securities often identified, however inaccurately, with a bygone age.

If we wish to confront and defeat the populist story in turn, I think we should be very skeptical of the capacity of any basically liberal story to do so. Liberalism today connotes individualism, a picture of the world in which we are isolated together. This is not a vision, I suggest, that conduces to strong bonds of solidarity. Instead, perhaps if we wish not only to resist but also to understand populism – embraced, notably, by many who might well fit into today’s wretched of the earth – we could do worse than seriously considering the alternative vision of socialism of Milbank and other radically orthodox theologians.


