

Prof. Dr. **John Milbank**, University of Nottingham, UK

John Milbank's work has been largely concerned with the relationship of theology to other disciplines, to modernity and to cultural practice. He has dealt with this question both genealogically and analytically. Part of his work is rooted in his doctoral thesis (eventually published in an expanded two-part version) on Giambattista Vico which tried to read him as a Catholic Humanist thinker articulating a modern and yet traditional poetic metaphysics and philosophy of history focused upon the participation of natural life and human making in the Divine Trinity and the Creative action of God.

After completing this thesis, Milbank embarked upon the studies that issued in his most well-known work, *Theology and Social Theory* in 1990. Here he argued that secularity was not a negative residue but a positive construction, which often involved heterodox theological elements, besides a debatable margination of or hostility to religion. The notion that theology was a specialty in debate with other scientific specialties was challenged: to the contrary, theology is already in part a social theory and social theories remain to a degree theological. The work has been perceived both as postmodern and as helping to inaugurate a post-secular challenge to postmodern nihilism.

Since then in the course of several articles and a book, *Being Reconciled*, Milbank has further elaborated a reflection on the question of the gift, both ethnographically and theologically. This work tends to suggest that, if slightly reworked, the Maussian understanding of gift-exchange can be rendered compatible with a Catholic Christian theological outlook: a future book on this is in the offing. The same work has challenged a typically phenomenological reading of the gift as disinterested and unliteral.

During the same period Milbank developed a theological critique of philosophy along parallel lines to his critique of the social sciences: arguing genealogically and analytically against the separation of philosophy from theology or vice-versa. Philosophy without theology is regarded as inhabiting a kind of post-Christian wasteland and as struggling to achieve in secular terms a synthesis that is now unattainable. In general he has argued for a return to metaphysics beyond both Analytic philosophy and Phenomenology, but at the same time that there is no metaphysics innocent of the perspectives of faith. This view has been articulated in several articles, in his debate book with Slavoj Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ* and his 2013 book *Beyond Secular Order*. Milbank is working towards a longer book-length statement of this argument. Its more positive aspect is represented by his work towards crafting a more adequate Trinitarian Ontology—see various articles with more work pending.

In terms of Christian doctrine and ethics, Milbank has written several essays. some of them collected in *The Word Made Strange* and in *The Future of Love*. He is also a public intellectual

and cultural and political activist. During the 1990's in Cambridge, he co-founded Radical Orthodoxy with Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward: a movement towards a kind of 'left integralism' in theology: insisting on a revived Romantic Christian Platonism beyond postmodernism, on the unity of grace and nature (after Henri de Lubac) and on the orientation of a Christian socialist politics to the Church as the community of charity and reconciliation (*The Suspended Middle*, 2005).

This movement has achieved international resonance and Milbank has strong connections in North America (where he lived and taught for seven years) and with France and Italy, besides many other European links. After his return to the UK in 2004, Milbank helped to shape an RO-influence in British politics, influencing both the Red Tory and the Blue Labour factions: Milbank cleaves to the latter. Together with Adrian Pabst he articulated his postliberal communitarian vision in *The Politics of Virtue* (2017). Beyond Alasdair Macintyre and Charles Taylor this book tries to engage also with the more political aspects of Plato and Aristotle, and to search for a personalist-corporatist vision beyond either liberal or social democracy, without succumbing to new modes of fascism.

Milbank is additionally a published poet and this artistic practice, along with his theoretical reflections on poetry (in *The Mercurial Wood* and *The Legend of Death*) are strongly related to his 'metaphysics of making' with roots both in Nicholas of Cusa and in Vico. His most important poetry book is *The Dances of Albion* which reflects obliquely on British and Irish identity. More recently he has started to redefine RO as including also a 'radicalized orthodoxy' which would regard 'radicals' like Origen, Maximus, Eriugena, Eckhart, Cusanus and William Blake as actually pushing the logic of orthodoxy itself to its full conclusions. This involves both an endorsement of universal salvation and an insistence that Trinitarian and Christological doctrines are not additions to monotheism but a better articulation of the latter. A key mark of this is the integration of the monistic with the personal. In an upcoming volume, *After Science and Religion*, published with Cambridge University Press, co-edited by Milbank and Peter Harrison, Milbank tries to rethink the theology and natural science relation rather in the way that I have tried to think the theology to social science one. A no doubt overly enthusiastic devotee of Twitter, Milbank has used it, in novel way, to issue a kind of continuous public diary and notebook, including besides comments on many things, also aphorisms, jokes and photographs.