

POSTMODERN CRITICAL WESLEYANISM:
WESLEY, MILBANK, NIHILISM, AND METANARRATIVE REALISM
Henry W. Spaulding II, Ph.D.

Introduction

This paper is offered in the hope of beginning a sustained conversation between Wesleyan-Holiness theology and Radical Orthodoxy. Such a conversation is necessitated by the emergence of postmodern philosophy/theology in all of its diversity. It would be a serious mistake to deny either the challenge or possibility presented by this moment in the history of Wesleyan-Holiness theology. Radical Orthodoxy understands the threat presented by postmodernism along with its limited possibilities. Perhaps, it is at this point that Radical Orthodoxy reveals its resonance with Wesleyan-Holiness most clearly. John Milbank, at least, is rather forthright in his admission that Radical Orthodoxy owes its inspiration to Methodism and holiness theology. This should give those of us within the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition sufficient reason to think more fully about possible connections between these two ways of engaging culture theologically.

Some of this conversation revolves around nihilism. The sundering of meaning suggested by nihilism points to the failure of the Enlightenment project and simultaneously challenges theology to gather its resources in order to constructively address issues of faith and practice. Radical Orthodoxy (RO) sees the threat posed by nihilism and proposes that the resources of the Christian faith are sufficient to confront its challenges. It is quite possible that RO has more to gain from a sustained conversation with Wesleyan-Holiness theology than many realize. The most significant benefit of this conversation for RO centers on the seriousness with which Wesley embraced primitive Christian practice, fundamental orthodoxy, and the plain sense of scripture. Wesleyan-Holiness theology is much more christologically centered and more seriously embraces the historic Church. While these doctrinal convictions are present in RO they are more speculatively engaged than wholly embraced. The purpose of this paper is to explore these issues and questions with the hope of defining Postmodern Critical Wesleyanism as an intellectually satisfying option.

There was a time when holiness congregations could be heard singing “Called Unto Holiness” with simple passionate faith. Camp meetings, seven-day revivals, and clear testimonies of second blessing holiness were often heard arising from holiness congregations.¹ Things were relatively simple in the not-too-distant past. The clearest evidence of this confidence was in the willingness of the holiness movement to start colleges, seminaries, and otherwise engage the world missionally. After all what did holiness theology have to fear? Its vision was as big as the God who promised a life set free from the power of sin. In fact, the best of the intellect could never be at conflict with the best of the faith. “Holiness Unto the Lord” had a broad vision and a vigorous theology with which to proclaim the gospel of freedom from the power of sin.

¹I understand the dangers and possibilities of linking Wesleyanism and Holiness Theology. The basic argument of this essay will be that it is possible, even advisable to make this link as it will guide the particular camp into which Wesleyan theology will be interpreted.

The nineteenth-century, the time of the genesis of the holiness movement, found itself ruled intellectually by the philosophies of Hegel, Marx, Kierkegaard, and even Nietzsche. One can say without the fear of exaggeration that to engage the nineteenth-century one had to be either Hegelian or anti-Hegelian, but no one who intended to do serious theology could ignore Hegel. The intellectual imagination of the nineteenth-century was defined by this last attempt by modernity to provide a fully satisfying metaphysic. To be sure, modernity did not easily let go of the imagination, but in subtle ways postmodernism began to creep into the minds and even hearts of those who were once confident. One cannot read Marx, Kierkegaard, or Nietzsche without seeing the ultimate failure of the modern/enlightenment project. In recent years this reality has slowly come to the attention of those who are doing theology in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition. Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard have found some foothold in the theology in the holiness camp. The world began to come unhinged and things that once had a clear sense of meaning were separated. A predictable nostalgia emerged whose chief strategy was to reify experience of the previous era.

Grace became a contract as it seemed for a time to put things back in order. The “altar theology” of Palmer is an example of understanding grace in terms of contract. Faith is replaced by the duty of God to honor His promises. The search for a psychology of holiness emerges in the wake of these transitions in Wesleyan-Holiness theology. Power, cleansing, eradication, and the baptism with the Holy Spirit become much more prevalent in holiness circles. Holiness theology replaces Wesleyan-Holiness theology as the norm for comprehending the Pentecostal experience of entire sanctification. For others, the modern/postmodern mood presented an unparalleled opportunity. Relational ontology, therefore, became a pathway to hitch Wesleyan-Holiness theology to a more adequate metaphysic. Wynkoop challenged long held beliefs within the holiness camp because of what she called a “credibility gap.”² Perhaps, this was a “subversive” move within the camp, but for some it managed to salvage holiness for a new generation.

The trajectory of Wesleyan-Holiness theology was defined by the “family feud” regarding the “baptism with the Holy Spirit.” Essentially, this was a debate within the tradition that refused to name the real enemy – the challenge of a new paradigm for doing Wesleyan-Holiness theology. This meant that Wesleyan-Holiness theology took place below the radar and for this reason was able to deny the real issue at stake. The issues can no longer be ignored and for this reason Wesley-Holiness theology must move and in fact is moving on to confront the real issues that defined the late twentieth-century: nihilism, the collapse of scientific realism, the end of metanarrative, and so on. According to John Milbank, “The end of modernity, which is not accomplished, yet continues to arrive, means the end of a single system of truth based on universal reason, which tells us what reality is like”³ This shift meant that theology no longer needed to measure up “to accepted secular standards of scientific truth or normative rationality.”⁴ The paradigmatic shift (from modernity to postmodernity)⁵ of the twentieth-century freed

² Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love* (K. C.: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1972), 39

³ John Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A Short *Summa* in Forty-two Responses to Unasked Questions,” in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed., Graham Ward (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 265.

⁴ Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinian”, 265.

⁵ It should be noted that modernity does not just move off the scene. Rather, it takes on another dimension calling into question some of its previous claims to synthesis, meaning, and method.

holiness theology from its “liberal envy,”⁶ but in so doing forced it to face nihilism with more seriousness than before. This essay is a preliminary reflection on this situation.

The argument of this paper will proceed by providing a theological account of nihilism as one clear problem for contemporary theology, even Wesleyan-Holiness theology. This treatment will be followed by a consideration of metanarrative realism as proposed by Radical Orthodoxy. The final move of this essay will be to suggest the broad parameters of a “Postmodern Critical Wesleyanism.” When all the evidence is considered, and with appreciation for the theological significance of RO, it seems clear that Wesleyan-Holiness theology out narrates both nihilism and Radical Orthodoxy.

Nihilism: A Theological Account

John Milbank begins *Theology and Social Theory* in the following way:

Once, there was no ‘secular’. And the secular was not latent, waiting to fill more space with the steam of the ‘purely human’, when the pressure of the sacred was relaxed. Instead there was the single community of Christendom, with its dual aspects of *sacerdotium* and *regnum*. The *saeculum*, in the medieval era, was not a space, a domain, but a time – the interval between fall and *eschaton* where coercive justice, private property and impaired natural reason must make shift to cope with the unredeemed effects of sinful humanity.⁷

Since the secular is not original it needs to be imagined as a given space. James K. A. Smith says, “In short, the secular emerged and along with it the notion of an autonomous reason that was supposedly neutral and objective, offering an account of the world uncontaminated by the theological.”⁸ The secular is not only complicit with ontology of violence, but posits itself as over against the sacred with a different logic, one that is dependent only upon the human. Milbank further argues this thesis by calling attention to the theological construction of secular politics. Accordingly, “it was necessary that Adam’s *dominium* be redefined as power, property, active right, and absolute sovereignty, and that Adam’s personhood be collapsed into this redefined mastery that is uniquely ‘his own’.”⁹ In fact, “It is in this inescapable imperative of nominalism-voluntarism that one discovers the kinship at the root of modern absolutism with modern liberalism.”¹⁰ Thus, the kinship between power, liberalism, and nihilism can be clearly linked with imagined secular space. Nihilism becomes the sundering of something, rendering it nothing, then the production of nothing as something.¹¹ Clearly, nihilism is a complex problem

⁶ Here I am referring to those within the Holiness Movement who have consciously sought define theology as an attempt to gain respectability with Protestant liberal theology. The most obvious place where this has become evident is to think of holiness as moral imperative. When holiness theology has made this the goal it has failed to define a unique intellectual space for doing theology. This also explains the interest in Paul Tillich among Wesleyan-Holiness theologians.

⁷ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. Second Edition (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1990, 2006), 9.

⁸ James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004), 88-89.

⁹ Milbank, *TST*, 13.

¹⁰ Milbank, *TST*, 14.

¹¹ Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 273. Here Cunningham is suggesting that nihilism

with links to liberalism, positivism, dialectics, and difference as the organization of *Theology and Social Theory* suggests. Simply put, nihilism is the sundering of meaning for metaphysics and morality. According to Toole, “Originary¹² and radical nihilism comes to be when one accepts as a fact that both suffering and the world in which it occurs are meaningless.”¹³ It is important to explore this complexity before a credible theological account can be sketched.

Recent Responses to Nihilism

Nihilism is a philosophical, cultural and theological problem/challenge. Three recent books are helpful for explicating this issue: David Toole, *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism, Tragedy, and Apocalypse*; Michael Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*; and Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology*. These books present distinct arguments regarding the emergence of nihilism.

Gillespie argues that Nietzsche profoundly misunderstood nihilism by linking it with the inability to think God. He further indicates that this misunderstanding has affected almost all philosophy since Nietzsche’s time. Gillespie proposes that nihilism does not begin with Nietzsche but with late scholastic thought especially at the hands of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. This view of nihilism emerges out of a “new concept of divine omnipotence and a corresponding concept of human power that arises in the late medieval period and it comes increasingly to characterize modern thought.”¹⁴ This means that increasingly the human will assumes priority over reason. Gillespie goes so far as to say that “The history of nihilism is the history of the development of this notion of will.”¹⁵ Therefore, according to Gillespie nihilism is not about the death of God, but the assertion of the priority of the will.

Cunningham has a different take on the issue of nihilism. He prefers to talk about the logic of nihilism “as sundering of the something, rendering it nothing, and then having the nothing be after all *as* something.”¹⁶ For Cunningham, nihilism “provides something out of

shares some space with the apophatic tradition and negative theology. This means, in part, that even with words fail us in light of profundity and breadth of the Christian faith meaning has a way of emerging. It also suggests that while the sundering of nihilism is problematic it can open other possibilities for theological engagement and speech.

¹² Originary nihilism refers to the emergence of nihilism in the modern consciousness as a response to the risk of losing “Being” amid “beings”, i.e. Heidegger’s forfeiture or Sartre’s bad faith or even Hegel’s bad infinite.

¹³ David Toole, *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism, Tragedy, and Apocalypse* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press/Perseus Books, 1998), 31-32. Toole adds, “a nihilist is someone who, when confronted from out of the abyss with the question of suffering, concludes in one stroke both that suffering stands as a judgment against the world as it is and yet in some way is redeemed and given meaning by the invocation of another perfect world” (33). Even more plainly Toole says, “Lest this point remain obscure, just note the fact that we no longer built Gothic cathedrals; instead we spend comparable resources building research hospitals. And in the same manner, physicians have replaced priest as figures of authority” (35).

¹⁴ Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), vii.

¹⁵ Gillespie, 255.

¹⁶ Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), xiii.

nowhere.”¹⁷ His conception of the logic of nihilism argues that it is not so much a lack of meaning as a new meaning on the far side of the normal categories used. In fact, he argues that:

If we are to speak seriously of nihilism we must, it seems, understand nihilism precisely to be an absence of nihilism: nihilism is not nihilistic. Indeed, it may well be best to characterize nihilism in plenitudinal, rather than negative plenitude – what has been referred to throughout *as* something – then we can realize that nihilism will not fail to provide what is usually supposed to preclude. Nihilism will provide values, gods, and most of all, it seems, intelligibility.¹⁸

This leads to an understanding of reality that depends upon transcendence. The theme of Cunningham’s book is to suggest a new way of doing theology, not ontotheology, but meontotheology. The way that Cunningham understands nihilism suggests that all too often theology does not dialogue with nihilism because of theology’s confusion about nihilism. He thinks that a robust Trinitarian theology will be able to dialogue with nihilism. Therefore, according to Cunningham nihilism is not so much about either the death of God or the priority of will over reason, but it is about learning to approach otherness as an occasion for genuine dialogue.

Michael Toole treats a number of themes surrounding nihilism. He tends toward Nietzsche’s understanding of nihilism, but observes that this is linked to a tragic view of history. He prefers apocalypse to this tragedy in the face of nihilism. He approaches the issue within the trajectory of John Howard Yoder’s theology.

Radical Orthodoxy and Nihilism

The end of modernity along with its nihilism provides an important intellectual event for Radical Orthodoxy. Radical Orthodoxy may not have observed the cathedrals of modern life crumble (as Tillich and Barth did), but the cathedrals have vanished as well in the wake of secular reason. In fact, the violence and coercion that have arisen from modern political theory are no surprise at all and can be understood best theologically. The grandeur of living in the shadow of the Gothic cathedral is no longer possible in the postmodern world. But Radical Orthodoxy longs not for the intellectual ferment of pre-war Berlin, but the imagination of Augustinianism and Thomism. Perhaps, the resonance between RO and Wesleyan-Holiness theology can be seen with the most clarity in this way. In fact, one can note in Radical Orthodoxy a longing for the cathedral, even if it is a rather different place than Aquinas could have envisioned.

Milbank locates modernity in absolute historicism, ontology of difference and ethical nihilism and suggests that each contributes to modernity’s end.¹⁹ Pickstock refers to modernity as the “emergence of the unliturgical world”²⁰ and the end of modernity’s inevitable dance with nihilism. Milbank sees modernity, especially political theory, in three denials: Baroque *poesis*, the Christian understanding of creation, and Aristotelian *praxis*.²¹ Modernity tends to locate

¹⁷Cunningham, xiv.

¹⁸Cunningham, 170.

¹⁹Milbank, *TST*, 278.

²⁰Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 3.

²¹Milbank, *TST*, 148.

meaning in the merely instrumental, or inhibition of chaos, and/or ahistorical maxims. This way of defining what is meaningful denies the importance of linking human action with the transcendent, creation *ex nihilo*, and virtue as praxis. These latter moves are important for theology because they deny the modern tendency to sever the immanent from the transcendence. Milbank's fundamental critique of modernity is that it embodies a covert violence that thrives on the antagonism which finally spells its demise. Milbank talks about "the logic of a fusion . . . perfectly realized not in liberalism, but in nihilism: the only transcendental self-identical reality is the recurrence of an empty will, or force, which always returns as the arbitrarily and unpredictably different."²² Milbank calls secular reason into question along with the modernity it arose from, by noting that modernity finally fails. His challenge is to "make it apparent that 'scientific' social theories are themselves theologies or anti-theologies in disguise."²³ Nihilism is the inescapable conclusion of modernity and it is at the same time the end of modernity as a viable intellectual project. It is only possible to maintain it coercively.

Theology and Nihilism

The analysis above should indicate that the most satisfying explanation for nihilism is theological. According to Laurence Hemming:

Nihilism is what comes about in response to the need to establish the self, my 'I' in the face of an omnipotent (and so potentially capricious) God, then nihilism is itself a way of being towards God (as being-apart), and the unfolding of nihilism as a history (specifically, then history of subjectivity) bears with it the trace of this being-with. It also has the structure of a conversation. Recalling how at the beginning of the essay I suggested faithfulness is a way of being, it now becomes possible to say the same of nihilism. In other words, both nihilism and faithfulness belong to ways of being-being towards (being-with, being-apart-from) other being and God. If we can name nihilism and Christian faithfulness as standing opposed, then we can also begin to see the way in which we can speak of them belonging together. This is speaking of them both in a historical unfolding of *something* which has intimately to with God. To ask this returns us to the question with which we began, which is how we might faithfully speak of God when we also speak of being and nihilism.²⁴

Therefore, nihilism may point to the bankruptcy of modernism/postmodernism in its sundering of meaning; however, in the wake of this bankruptcy, it is possible to point out an even deeper faith. Pickstock talks about an attempt to "counterpose to the polity of death (with) . . . the liturgical lineaments of the sacred polis."²⁵ To this Milbank adds, "Whatever its response may be to nihilism, postmodern theology can only proceed by explicating Christian practice."²⁶ The failure of scientific realism and the collapse of metanarrative spell trouble for culture and even the church. RO argues that it is not finally the atheism of Nietzsche that becomes problematic,

²²Milbank, *TST*, 428.

²³Milbank, *TST*, 3.

²⁴ Laurence Paul Hemming, "Nihilism: Heidegger on the Grounds of Redemption" in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (New York: Routledge Press, 1999), 100.

²⁵Pickstock, 169.

²⁶Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism", 267.

but a far more fundamental loss of transcendence which severs any meaningful connection to God and simultaneously surrenders all action to the realm of the arbitrary which cannot but help all discourse to become violent. The fact that this problem is not forced upon the Church, but arises from the false humility of the church make the situation all the more ironic. Accordingly, “The great failure of modern Christian ontology is not to see that secular reason makes the unwarranted assumption that ‘the made’ lies beneath the portals of the sacred, such that a humanly made world is regarded as arbitrary and as cutting us off from eternity.”²⁷ The chief strategy for outwitting nihilism for Radical Orthodoxy is metanarrative realism.

Metanarrative Realism

The theological account of nihilism reveals several important layers to the conversation. First, nihilism arises from the metaphysical exhaustion of the modern project – Nietzsche. According to this view a covert atheism always existed in the *cogito ergo sum*. Second, nihilism arises from the positing of Being as over against God with the resulting diminishment of transcendence and the necessity seeing all human action as arbitrary – Duns Scotus and William Ockham. This is the interpretation that characterizes the thought of Milbank and Pickstock. Third, nihilism presents a constructive possibility for theology in that the sundering of meaning can give way to the far side of meaning – Conor Cunningham and Laurence Hemming. This understanding of nihilism comes very close of the Christian mysticism, negative theology, and the apophatic tradition. The account of nihilism in RO finds resonance with the second and third option, but Milbank and Pickstock see only the problems and not the possibilities of nihilism.

Metanarrative realism intends to name the appropriateness of metanarrative along with its realism. Milbank says:

To have a genuine metanarrative realism, one would have to pay attention to the play between the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic. Here the narrative itself is always already internally torn between ‘staying in the place’ of its assumed frame of reference, or breaking out of this frame to project a new one through the temporal course of events.²⁸

This is apparent in the liturgy of the Church, the positing of ‘Another City,’²⁹ and in counter-history, counter-ethic, counter-ontology, and counter-kingdom. According to Steven Shakespeare, “Radical Orthodoxy demands a specific commitment to the Christian story alone as the way to combat nihilism”³⁰ The heart of the radical orthodox critique of modern philosophy and modern theology is its complicity with violence. Secular reason is the name given to this, but it is always important to remember secular space emerges out of sacred space. Harmony is replaced with conflict as the primal narrative in nihilistic modernism and postmodernisms of dissolution. According to the Milbank:

The pathos of modern theology is its false humility. For theology, this must be a fatal disease, because once theology surrenders its claim to be a metadiscourse, it cannot any

²⁷Milbank, *TST*, 433.

²⁸Milbank, *TST*, 388.

²⁹According to Milbank, “In my view, a true Christian metanarrative realism must attempt to retrieve and elaborate the ancient history given by Augustine in the *Civitas Dei*.” Milbank, *TST*, 389.

³⁰Steven Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2007), 1 56-57. Milbank says, “It is theology itself that will provide its own account of its own final causes at work in human history, on the basis of its own particular, and historically specific faith” (*TST*, 382).

longer articulate the word of the creator God, but is bound to turn into the oracular voice of some finite idol, such as historical scholarship, humanist psychology, or transcendental philosophy.³¹

This describes the emergence of a pagan *mythos* constituted by conflict and violence. Such is the nihilistic musings of the modern world, one that Christian faith has all too often embodied in its history, ethics, and ontology. Therefore, when radical orthodox theologians attempt to outwit the nihilistic overtures of modernity the place to begin is a new kind of narrative, one that is appropriately speculative and real: metanarrative realism.

Metanarrative realism is associated with the genesis of the Church. Steven Shakespeare observes, “The social event of the Church is therefore not one among others. It reveals the true nature of society and relationships. It shows us what creation is intended to be, and what God is like.”³² For Milbank:

Hence the metanarrative is *not* just the story of Jesus, it is the continuing story of the Church, already realized in a finally exemplary way by Christ, yet still to be realized universally, in harmony with Christ, and yet *differently*, by all generations of Christians.

The metanarrative, therefore, is the genesis of the Church, outside which context one could only have an ahistorical, Gnostic Christ. But once one has said this, one then has to face up to the real implication of a narrative that is at one and the same time a recounting of a ‘real history’, and yet has also an interpretative, regulative function with respect to all other history. The real implication is this: one simply cannot exhibit in what its ‘meta’ character consists without *already* carrying out this interpretation, this regulation, to the widest possible extent.³³

It becomes manifestly clear that RO appreciates the fact the postmodernism undermines the universal claims of secular reason. Further RO welcomes the emphasis upon story, community and virtue found among the postliberals. Finally, RO does not seek to establish a foundation for Christian narration except the beauty of the story itself. Steven Shakespeare adds, “The metanarrative – the big, overarching Christian story – is a story of everything, centered on Christ. But it seems to depend entirely upon the Church.”³⁴

Milbank understands that narratives structure our world, but always with “an element of indeterminacy.”³⁵ Milbank believes that “‘Narrating,’ therefore turns out to be a more basic category than either explanation or understanding: unlike either of these it does not assume punctiliar facts or discrete meanings.”³⁶ Laurence Hemming points to metanarrative realism in the following,

Orthodoxy in this sense ceases to be ‘assertion’ and is better understood as prayer, and most formally, as sacrament – as relationship to God brought about in the communal

³¹Milbank, *TST*, 1.

³²Shakespeare, 85.

³³Milbank, *TST*, 389-390.

³⁴ Shakespeare, 61.

³⁵Toole, *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo*, 66.

³⁶Milbank, *TST*, 267.

speech of the assembly as a mode of the being of Christ: a mode of revelation of something not-human (the divine) within something human (me, the assembly).³⁷

Pickstock suggests that it is possible to outwit nihilism only by doxology.³⁸ In this same way Milbank refers to the task of the theologian as “redeeming estrangement.”³⁹ Perhaps, the key to understanding the manner in which Milbank seeks to respond to nihilism is to understand how he sees the task of theology, “it is to tell again the Christian *mythos*, pronounce again the Christian *logos*, and call again for Christian *praxis* in a manner that restores their freshness and originality. It must articulate Christian difference in such a fashion as to make it strange.”⁴⁰ Whether as a metanarrative realism, prayer, doxology, or redeeming estrangement the strategy of radical orthodox theology is to provide a radically different vision of the world,

And the absolute Christian vision of ontological peace now provides the only alternative to a nihilistic outlook. Even today, in the midst of the self-torturing circle of secular reason, there can open to view again a series with which it is in no continuity, the emanation of harmonious difference, the exodus of new generations, the path of peaceful flight . . .⁴¹

The story of Israel and the story of Jesus are extended into the life of Church through the generations.⁴² Metanarrative realism structures life and outwits nihilism by a non-identical repetition which in turn provides an analogical code instead of a ‘univocal code.’⁴³

The last chapter of *Theology and Social Theory* provides a compact argument for how the Christian faith outwits nihilism. An important part of the argument of the chapter is counter-history, counter-ethics, counter-ontology, and counter-kingdom.⁴⁴ These four proposals each seek to out narrate nihilism. A counter-history seeks to tell history from an ecclesial origination. It seeks to contrast ontological antagonism and ontological peace by comprehending each contrasting historical narrative.⁴⁵ Milbank also seeks to define a counter-ethic which is told from the perspective of charity, forgiveness, and conversion. Milbank hopes to avoid both antique and modern Stoicism with his counter-ethics. Here he evokes Augustine who according to Milbank

³⁷Hemming, 93.

³⁸Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), xii.

³⁹John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 1.

⁴⁰Milbank, *TST*, 381.

⁴¹Milbank, *TST*, 434.

⁴²According to Milbank, “For theology, and theology alone, difference remains real difference since it is not subordinate to immanent univocal process or the fate of a necessary suppression. Instead, the very possibility of substitutive transference is here held to be a peaceful affirmation of the other, consummated in a transcendent infinity. And seeming arbitrariness of the ‘next step’ in this process of referral is held to be governed by an aesthetic role which transcends the polarity of the same-and-determined over against the contingent-and-heterogeneous.” Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 113.

⁴³Toole, *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo*, 66.

⁴⁴Milbank speaks to his strategy, “Only, therefore, if we can reinvok, like Augustine, another city, another history, another mode of being, can we discover for ourselves a social space that is not the space of the *pagus* crossed with the *domunium* of an arbitrary, Scotist God” Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*: 321.

⁴⁵Milbank, *TST*, 390.

understands charity as “that exact appropriateness of action necessary to produce a ‘beautiful’ order, and, in this sense, charity is the very consummation of both justice and prudence.”⁴⁶ Milbank also seeks to define a counter-ontology which confirms the practice of charity and forgiveness, reconciliation with difference, and the primacy of peace.⁴⁷ The importance of the Trinity for this understanding proves obvious.⁴⁸ Such ontology subverts the Platonism of the ‘Divided Line’ such that “‘the made’ lies beneath the portals of the sacred, such that a humanly made world is regarded as arbitrary and as cutting us off from eternity.”⁴⁹ The Trinity requires a theology of participation, an issue that will be taken up shortly, and it equally points to a God capable of including difference without the necessity of violence.⁵⁰ Nihilism is the positing of the nothing that is nothing and the nothing that is violence according to the Milbank. Beyond this, Milbank indicates in some places that nihilism is connected to the overemphasis upon the will. If Radical Orthodoxy is able to talk about nihilism as an intellectual possibility it will only be in the sense that nihilism is the positing of the nothing that is something. The final component of Milbank’s argument concerns counter-kingdom. At this point he appears to wink in the face of history for he admits that for now at least the Church “has helped to unleash a more ‘naked’ violence.”⁵¹ For some this admission indicates that Milbank sees the illogic of his position. Toole suggests,

For Milbank’s project is thrown into question not only because of its inability to offer a persuasive account of nonviolence but also because he offers a less than convincing portrayal of nihilism as somehow fixated upon and bound to violence. The possibility that nihilism is not simply about violence throws Milbank’s narrative further off balance.⁵²

The purpose here is not to offer a critique of Milbank, but for Toole this means that Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy are hopelessly mired in tragedy. While this may be the case the real issue is whether Milbank has overstated the case for the ontology of violence.

⁴⁶Milbank, *TST*, 411.

⁴⁷Milbank, *TST*, 423.

⁴⁸“The harmony of the Trinity is therefore not the harmony of a finished totality but a ‘musical’ harmony of infinity. Just as an infinite God must be power-act, so the doctrine of the Trinity discovers the infinite God to include a radically ‘external’ relationality. This God can only speak to us simultaneously as the Word incarnate, and as the indefinite spiritual response, in time, which is the Church.” Milbank, *TST*, 424.

⁴⁹Milbank, *TST*, 425.

⁵⁰“The God who is, who includes difference, and yet is unified, is not a God sifted out as ‘truth’, but a God who speaks in the harmonious happenings of Being.” Milbank, *TST*, 430.

⁵¹Milbank, *TST*, 432. He adds to this: “In the midst of history, the judgment of God has already happened. And either the Church enacts the vision of paradisaal community which this judgment opens out, or else it promotes a hellish society beyond any terrors known to antiquity: *corruptio optimi pessima*. For the Christian interruption of history ‘decoded’ antique virtue, yet thereby helped to unleash first liberalism and then nihilism. Insofar as the Church has failed, and has even become a hellish anti-Church, it has confined Christianity, like everything else, within the cycle of the ceaseless exhaustion and return of violence.” Milbank, *TST*, 433.

⁵²Toole, *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo*, 77.

*Postmodern Critical Wesleyanism*⁵³

Radical Orthodoxy presents a powerful narrative in the face of the emergence of nihilism in the modern/postmodern world. The importance of metanarrative realism for confronting nihilism cannot be overstated. Addressing this problem using the resources of Radical Orthodoxy involves a broad awareness of philosophy, theology, social theory, and cultural analysis. Yet, one comes away from the reading of Radical Orthodoxy with the sense that its greatest challenge remains getting “down to earth” where nihilism must be confronted. No doubt a robust account of metanarrative realism must involve a speculative dimension. However, it is not real clear that Radical Orthodoxy ever gets beyond the speculation. A credible argument can be made that Radical Orthodoxy does not seem willing to face the realities of the historical/actual church where ideals can often be at odds with theological aspiration. Perhaps, Wesleyan-Holiness theology with its willingness to confront the realities of sin with an orthodox Christology and a robust Pneumatology, can accomplish what Radical Orthodoxy attempts within the content of the practiced Christianity.

It is essential to acknowledge that Postmodern Critical Wesleyanism provides a short hand way of saying a good bit about Wesleyanism. First, by postmodern I intend to suggest that an adequate contemporary Wesleyanism must seek to subvert the universal totalizing claims of reason. Further it must consciously seek to do theology non-foundationally, thus avoiding the rational foundationalism of Descartes and Kant. Second, critical intends to suggest that reason remain essential to Wesleyanism, but is mostly understood as practical rationality. Space does not permit a full account of the problems associated with Kant’s ‘pure reason’, but one must note that when one employs reason in Wesleyanism, it usually serves faith, Scripture, tradition, and theology. Therefore, a critical Wesleyanism remains one that seeks to deploy a practical rationality devoted to the historic revelation of the Christ in service to the body of Christ and as a doxology to the world. Third, Wesleyanism seeks to designate the usual themes of fundamental Wesleyan theology: original sin, justification by faith, and Christian perfection. While these are usually understood to be the pillars of Wesleyan theology it is should also be understood that Wesleyanism is at its root an attempt to articulate a catholic faith and as such affirms ecumenical creeds of Christendom. Wesleyanism is grounded in the historical traditions of the Christian faith. Therefore, a postmodern critical Wesleyanism is able to see the problems and possibilities associated with nihilism and then articulate a theology that out narrates Radical Orthodoxy.

Nihilism no doubt remains a powerful challenge to contemporary faith. This challenge becomes especially clear with the assertion of an autonomous self. The affirmation of a practiced Christianity provides a response an over emphasis upon the autonomous self, but a postmodern critical Wesleyanism will seek to push the analysis deeper. The rupture between self/God, self/world, and self/other unavoidably plays itself out in the postmodern world. In other words, it is possible and even advisable to challenge the viability of the autonomous self posited by secular reason. Wesley talks about this in terms of the “Character of a Methodist.” He defines such a person as one that is happy, prays, has a pure heart, keeps the commandments, presents his soul and body as a living sacrifice, and understands that all doing is to the glory of God. A Methodist is “inwardly and outwardly conformed to the will of God, as revealed in the written

⁵³ I acknowledge that I have chosen “Postmodern Critical Wesleyanism” in conscious debt to Milbank’s essay “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism”.

word.”⁵⁴ He also says, “All the commandments of God he accordingly keeps, and that with all his might.”⁵⁵ These comments illustrate that a Wesleyan theology is about a living faith, one that offers an option to a sterile and abstract faith. It is a practiced faith, one that is constituted as gift, participation, and practice. Wesley’s theology illustrates that resources are available within the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition for repairing the rupture that seems constitutive of nihilism.

Three theological trajectories suggest the parameters of the Wesleyan-Holiness response to nihilism that have the capacity to out narrate Radical Orthodoxy. The first sphere involves a Trinitarian metaphysic vigorous enough to engender a theology of gift. At the most basic level this first move serves as a challenge to all attempts to understand life and action autonomously. Likewise, this move challenges all decisionistic conceptions of the self. Trinitarianism suggests a theonomous ground for all of life, one that is dependent upon revelation. This is what RO means by baroque poesis. It is as God has revealed himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and as that life has overflowed to all creation that we come to understand gift. Life arises from the unexpected grace of God.

Blondel makes this very point, “Action is not completed in the natural order.”⁵⁶ Contra-Kant, Blondel makes it clear that action cannot be fully understood until it comes to rest in communion. Milbank confirms this analysis by saying that “Blondel’s phenomenology concludes negatively, with the paradox that human will, from its most native desire, demands a completion that goes beyond its own resources. In its immanent impulses it requires the transcendent, which, though necessary to it, can only be superadded, freely given.”⁵⁷ Since all action arises in response to and finds completion in the divine life, it is important to consciously understand that the doctrine of the Trinity serves as the fundamental Christian narrative. It is this reference to the divine that challenges modern theology to heal the rupture. Central to any consideration of a choosing self is the conviction that all choice is predicated upon gift. Crucial to this observation is the understanding of the self as doxological.

Augustine says, “Your works praise you, to the end that we may love you, and we love you to the end that your works may praise you.”⁵⁸ Action is praise and such a life is a prayer. A Christian life is one that is uttered in the presence of a God who has called humanity in the Word to participate in Him. Hanby observes, “Thus on Augustine’s terms, nihilism can arise only when doxology fails, and all that is not doxology is nihilism.”⁵⁹ A doxological self is one that is framed by a prayer uttered to God that in turn spills over into the world of associations as invitation. Therefore, action is a prayer, one that is first doxology.

What does it mean to be an acting self? The place to begin this reflection is on the God who exists in everlasting donation and return. This logic becomes clear in the following,

⁵⁴Wesley, “The Character of a Methodist,” *Wesley’s Works*, 6:346.

⁵⁵Wesley, “The Character of a Methodist”, 6:344.

⁵⁶Maurice Blondel, *Action: An Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, trans. by Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1893, 1984), 358.

⁵⁷Milbank, *TST*, 210

⁵⁸Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. by John K. Ryan (New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 1960), 367.

⁵⁹Michael Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 116.

In this aesthetic model, the place of the Holy Spirit is secured as the irreducibility of the interpretative moment *either* to formal structure, *or* to *a priori* aesthetic categories of subjectivity. In this way a reduction of Trinitarian logic to dialectics, in which (on the Anselmian model) Father and Son as it were ‘hand over’ the univocal outcome of their intercourse, is overcome. Instead, the Spirit which proceeds from paternal-filial difference is genuinely a ‘second difference’ whose situation is that of a listener to a rhetorical plea of one upon behalf of the other. As the Father is not immediately available, the Spirit must listen, judge and interpret the testimony of the Son – a testimony in which ‘personal integrity’ is the content of witness to reality.⁶⁰

It is as the Father loves the Son and as that love is returned in the Spirit that the life of God is constituted as being-in-communion. It is in this way that the persons of the Trinity act. We know as we are known and the only real way to understand this is as a prayer. God has shown us how to be and at the same time evacuated the idea that being is separate from doing. The response in time is the Church. Human beings are called by the Spirit through the foolishness of preaching to be enacted in the world. According to John Milbank, “Finally in Christianity, God is thought of as asking only for the offering of our freewill, in the return of love to him. This is no longer in any sense a self-destructive or self-division, but rather a self-fulfillment, an offering of the fullness of Being. It is receiving God: ‘deification’.”⁶¹ According to Milbank, “Every action proceeds, outwards, away from ourselves hitherto, and back into a public domain, as something in principle appropriable by others.”⁶²

The second trajectory involves participation. Augustine helps us to see part of the meaning of participation: “God is the only source to be found of any good things, but especially of those which make a man good and those which will make him happy; only from him do they come into a man and attach themselves to a man.”⁶³ Understanding the Triune life of God provides the starting place for a theology of action leads one to see the importance of participation. The subject/object split is part of the grammar of the modern world, but what is often lost in this process is a deeper insight regarding participation. We are able to act because we participate in God. Knowing is not a wrapping of the mind around some exterior reality. Rather, knowing is being known and allowing that participation to define life. Understanding the interpenetration of life in the Spirit helps us to understand the nature of action more clearly.

The self that participates is not the self-authenticating self of much modern philosophy/theology. There is a real sense in which the self is lost only to be found again in a new and better reality. Stanley Hauerwas suggests: “The loss of the ‘self’ and the increasing appreciation of the significance of the body, and in particular the body’s permeability, can help us rediscover holiness not as an individual achievement but as the work of the Holy Spirit building up the body of Christ.”⁶⁴ Hauerwas is pointing to an inconsistency in much holiness

⁶⁰ Milbank, *Word Made Strange*, 188.

⁶¹ John Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism”, 271.

⁶² Milbank, *TST*, 357.

⁶³ Augustine, *The Trinity* Trans by Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991, 1997), 350.

⁶⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 78.

theology at this point. He observes: “The ‘self’ that theologians now rush to save is the ‘sovereign self’ that sought to be its own ground.”⁶⁵ Action, when it is understood through the lens of a Wesleyan-Holiness theology, will always be constituted by participation.

The third trajectory involves practical reason through the means of grace. The means of grace become a way of engaging the world. For example, baptism is a way of coming to see ourselves as owned by God. When it functions this way, it is a practical rationality. The same could be said for hospitality to the stranger, visiting the sick or even discernment. There is a sense in which the means of grace are ways to “reason” the world. They locate the self as recipient while at the same time driving us to act. According to Serene Jones, the means of grace free us and form us.⁶⁶ It is in this rationality that the church is able to embody holiness.

All three trajectories considered as part of this constructive proposal intersect at action. The Triune metaphysic frames the centrality of gift. Participation drives the human agent to act and invites all other agents as well as creation to join in transformative action. Thus, the agent is transformed and transforms in the economy of grace. Practical rationality through the means of grace becomes the way the world is construed and engaged. The rationality engendered by the means of grace re-narrates all of life, including action. Graham Ward makes this point:

If the Church is to speak in and to the present *Zeitgeist*, then it must recover its deliberations of desire and articulate again its theology of eros. It must do so in a way that learns from, but goes beyond, the contractualisms of Hobbes and Spinoza, and the hierarchical teleology of Hegel. It must do so in a way which maintains corporeality and emphasizes the formation of substantial communities through shared practices.⁶⁷

These shared practices are the rationality that defines the Christian faith. They serve as the way of engaging the world, whether in doxology or invitation. The means of grace are a practice and as such they represent a way of engaging life, of acting.

The three trajectories set out in this section (gift, participation, and practice) are the first steps to a larger endeavor. Milbank approaches this in the following comment: “For a polity based on virtue, the goal of authority is not simply an effective peace or 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.”⁶⁸ The interesting part of this observation is the connection between virtue and character. A Wesleyan-Holiness theology of action is much more connected to character than decision. No doubt there are many decisions that a human agent will make, but the interesting thing is not a decision, but the endurance of those moments into a character. A Wesleyan-Holiness theology of action will seek to comprehend those through the lens of gift, participation, and practice.

⁶⁵ Hauerwas, 98.

⁶⁶ Serene Jones, “Graced Practices: Excellence and Freedom in the Christ Life,” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 58.

⁶⁷ Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 151.

⁶⁸ Milbank, *TST*, 326.

A Postmodern Critical Wesleyanism out narrates Radical Orthodoxy because it more adequately locates itself in the incarnational realities of the Christian faith. Radical Orthodoxy calls for a theology of gift, but Wesleyan-Holiness theology grounds itself in the historic gift of the orthodox faith. Radical Orthodoxy appropriates develops a theology of participation, but it is Wesleyan-Holiness theology that provides structures of meaning for transforming participation. Radical Orthodoxy calls for Christian practice within the historic Church, but it is Wesleyan-Holiness theology that actually locates itself in the historical practice of the Church. Catherine Pickstock says:

Thus, through Christ, every good thing is transposed into gift, but not in the sense that creation is first given and only afterwards animated as gift, but insofar as creation takes place through Christ it is created as good, and therefore perforce participates in His character as gift.⁶⁹

When nihilism confronts this plenitudinal reality it cannot hope to stand. Perhaps the words of Charles Wesley say this best:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night.
Thine eyes diffused a quick'ning ray.
I woke; the dungeon flamed with light.
My chains fell off; my heart was free.
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.⁷⁰

⁶⁹Pickstock, 241.

⁷⁰Charles Wesley, "And Can It Be"?