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Radical Orthodoxy: A Brief Introduction

Précis: In recent years, participants in a theological movement known as Radical Orthodoxy have unleashed a comprehensive attack on what they judge to be the idolatrous quality of much that defined modernity. Radical Orthodoxy benefits from a postmodern critique of modernity, exposes the missteps of postmodernity, and then boldly goes far beyond mere critique. It is now mounting an effort to recover and restate the genius and power of the Christian faith for the Church, and the public arena. On a broad front (economics, politics, theology, philosophy, and so forth), contributors challenge the modern notion that there is a "secular" domain from which God can and should be excluded. They charge that through claims made for the "secular," modernity tried to create a story (liberal absolutism) so comprehensive and complete that God would just disappear. Those who led this effort failed miserably. Furthermore, they failed to admit their indebtedness to the Christian faith for much of what they tried to accomplish. In prophetic tones, Radical Orthodoxy charges that modernity was largely a project of arrogance and power. In thought, word and deed it forcibly ejected the Church and the Christian faith from the public arena. That proved to be a catastrophic error, for only according to the truth and beauty of God as the Christian faith, through the Church, proclaims it, can persons and the human community be properly and truly formed. Nothing exists outside of our divinely ordained vocation of fellowship with God. All of existence participates in God's grace.

Introduction

Upon first hearing of the current theological movement known as "Radical Orthodoxy" I sat up and took notice. My mind raced to ask questions. How does one become more "radical" than "orthodox"? Has someone finally found a way to "out-orthodox" Karl Barth? Is this a new cloak for Fundamentalism?

As I began to work my way into RO, the subject proved more complex than I had anticipated. Whether or not it is "radically orthodox" as the movement claims, I will leave to your judgment. I assume that some of you may be more familiar with RO than I am, and so I will welcome your additions and corrections.

Even though RO has become a significant theological movement, it seems to be largely oriented to the West. Its conversation is principally with the Enlightenment and modernity, postmodern thinkers, and some American theologians and continental Roman Catholics. Because of its *holistic* understanding of grace, the Christian message, human life, creation and materiality, I can easily see how RO would be attractive to Christian theologians in the Orient, and how it could be beneficially adapted to an Asian context.

RO is a bold attempt by a group of Christian theologians to take the measure of both modernity and postmodernity, and to do so from both a confessional and a public perspective. Although more appreciative of postmodernity than modernity, RO sets out to expose certain internal failures of both by using their own concepts and language.[1]

RO is meant to be a "post-secular theology," for in a bold, if not arrogant, style it calls into question the notion and claims of secularity that have marked the West for almost three-hundred years. Although "the secular" (as autonomous) remains a powerful aspect of contemporary philosophical, cultural and political rhetoric, RO charges that its alleged legitimacy is a myth. So RO tries to dismantle what has long appeared fixed--the world understood independently of the sacred. Related to this, like the prophet Elijah on Mt. Carmel, RO levels prophetic charges against all forms of modern theology that have made peace with the secular, for they have tried to combine fidelity to Christ with obeisance to the Ba'als of modernity. RO calls into judgment all "correlationist" theologies and argues that along with the demise of modernity goes the demise of all such theologies. If "the secular" is an apostate claim and concept, then by implication so are the theologies that begin by enshrining "the secular."

Once "the secular" has been dismantled, proponents of RO believe, a new space for confessional proclamation in the so-called "public square" will result. This would be a public theology that completely rejects the Constantinian arrangement and that proceeds without granting license to the secular as an autonomous realm.

I will first present some background for RO's development. Then I will briefly state and explain the movement's major themes. Finally, I will identify some of the major critiques of RO. For this brief exposition I am relying heavily upon James K.A. Smith, Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology (Baker Academic/Paternoster, 2004)[2] and upon John Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A Short Summa in Forty-two Responses to Unasked Questions."[3]

Background

I.1. The birth of RO is traceable to John Milbank's Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason (Blackwell, 1993).[4] RO was initially identified as a "Cambridge movement." It focused theological attention on the UK. Subsequently, RO has received considerable attention in the United States, and to some extent on the Continent. The three major shapers of RO are John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward.

I.2. Milbank rejected all "correlationist" theological projects (e.g., Bultmann, Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and more recently, David Tracy) that tried to *correlate* the claims of Christian revelation with the agenda of a particular culture or politico-economic system, both of which to some extent functioned as normative for the Christian theological project. The "correlationist" goal was to formulate the Christian faith in ways that would be universally accessible and acceptable on secular and rational bases. Milbank charged that "Modern theology on the whole [the Tubingen liberal project] accepts that

philosophy has its own legitimacy, its own autonomy apart from" Christian revelation. Although I think the critique of Tillich is quite unfair, his use of Existentialist philosophy is supposed to illustrate Milbank's point; it is *correlationist.* Such theology articulates our knowledge of God through categories of being generally provided by supposedly autonomous philosophy. Karl Barth, by contrast, is held up as one who rejected the "correlationist" model. He was a "revelationist," not a "correlationist," for he rejected the notion of a neutral or secular "point of contact" between the gospel and culture. RO stands in positive relationship to all those theologians and theological movements that challenge secular autonomy (Barth, Yoder, Hauerwas, Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and Abraham Kuyper). Erroneously, liberal theology assumed the legitimacy of autonomous secular categories and thereby forfeited the right to adjudicate them.[5] According to Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, the modern correlationist project continues in much of what passes for "postmodern theology," namely in the religious work of Jacques Derrida and John Caputo.

I.3. RO rejects what it sees as the modern pride of liberal theology for which Christian tradition wasn't good enough. By contrast, RO supposedly embraces Christian tradition. It believes the insights the Holy Spirit gave to the early Church have much to say to the contemporary Church—and world. RO is not meant to be a monologue within the Church, but a *kerygmatic* engagement with contemporary culture. It promotes a distinctly theological engagement with the world and with the academy that investigates this world. RO's goal is to provide a comprehensive Christian account of every aspect of the world—social relationships, economic organization, political formation, aesthetic expression, and so on. It has set out to produce a radically Christian sociology, economics, and so on. It isn't interested in "dialogue" with the "secular" disciplines, and it doesn't defer to the long-assumed "truth" of the secular sciences. Instead, RO assails the alleged finality and legitimacy of the secular that underlies these disciplines.

I.4. As further background for understanding RO we need to observe its intellectual genealogy. It is a theological movement that speaks the language of contemporary continental (especially new French) thought. It draws upon the thought of Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault and others because those thinkers have confronted the internal breakdown of the Enlightenment project. RO assails modernity's claims regarding the secular and autonomous reason, but it also critiques postmodern thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, John Caputo, and Gilles Deleuze as being insufficiently postmodern.[6] For postmodernity to be persistent in its critique of modernity, it must call into question the very project of the secular. It ought to become post-secular. RO supposedly shows postmodern thinkers how to be truly postmodern, i.e., post-secular and post-nihilistic. So, among its tasks, RO exposes the nihilism it thinks marks much postmodern philosophy.

The alleged nihilism arises because for postmodern thought the "subject" now indicates not an identifiable reality, as in modernity, but "a point of potent 'intensity'" that is redefined (rearranged) according to changing structural (narrative) patterns. RO agrees joins with postmodern thought in declaring an end to the primacy of the "subjective knower" over the "objective, and in supporting the importance of "narrative relations" in

the constitution of the "person," but it rejects the notion that "person" is not more than a series of complex, constantly shifting relations. Rather, according to RO, "person" manifests and temporally reflects eternity "as the possibility of historical progress into God."[7] Thus, postmodern nihilism is overcome.

I.5. But RO doesn't stop with polemical *expose*, it works to recover a comprehensive, alternative Christian vision of human life by returning to premodern sources, without thereby reinstituting premodernity.

I.6. RO draws upon the *nouvelle theologie* (critical of the received Thomistic tradition and the "transcendental Thomism" of Karl Rahner[8] which tended to separate the cosmos into natural, i.e., autonomous, and supernatural elements) of Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar, Jean Daniélou, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Louis Bouyer and others.[9] Henri de Lubac is held to be a greater theological revolutionary than Barth, because, it is thought, he transcended the assumption shared by all modern theology (viz., the reality of the secular). de Lubac and his associates resorted to the early fathers and patristic theology. They sought to rediscover the riches of the Church's two-thousand-year treasury by returning to the headwaters of Christian doctrine *(resourcement,* the "sources" of Christian faith were "reinterrogated" with new questions). They set aside the dualistic perception of nature and grace that had derived from scholastic Thomism. de Lubac thought the received Thomistic tradition supported the notion of a pure *saeculum*, autonomous from and devoid of grace. By contrast, de Lubac argued that there is a sense in which nature is always already graced. As graced ("gifted") in character, nature should never be thought of as autonomous, as simply secular.

What is true of nature is also true of reason; it too participates in grace. Any dualistic distinction between reason and grace, between nature and grace, is a product of modernity. Christian theology must so recognize and judge the distinction, and must not accept modernity's ground rules. The natural and the supernatural must not "be understood as two different levels or realities, but rather [as] varying intensities of grace."[10]

I.7. This sharp and conscious change in direction can be described as the "integralist revolution" because it integrates grace and nature, sacred and secular.[11] *Nouvelle theologie* wanted to end the hegemony of modern categories and distinctions within the Church. For de Lubac this meant principally retrieving a deeply Augustinian vision, a vision RO theologians share. The primary Augustinian source is The City of God. RO can be thought of as a postmodern critical Augustinianism.

But why Augustine? *First*, because he represents a worldview not yet contaminated by the invention of the secular; he isn't modern. *Second*, in one sense Augustine's cultural situation mirrors our own postmodern context. He lived with, and was confronted by, historic and entrenched paganism. He lived in the dawn of the ascendancy of Christianity. We stand at the end of Christendom and the re-emergence of radical pluralism. But like Augustine, we in the Church today engage in the theological task in the shadow of a dominant empire and religious pluralism. *Third*, the substance of

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Augustine's thought resonates with the post-foundationalist project that rejects the autonomy of reason and the autonomy of the sociopolitical sphere. Augustine's epistemology, his cultural analysis, and his theological vision are in tune with the Church's present needs.

In summary, Augustine is important because for him there is no secular or nonreligious sphere the Church has to recognize. Modernity and postmodernity are wrong to claim otherwise. Today's options are two: paganism or true worship (We won't have time to explore how RO embraces an "Augustinian Aquinas" who rejects the notion of an autonomous nature).

I.8. A final significant contributor to the RO recipe is the Neoplatonism that influenced the early Fathers, Augustine, and Aquinas. From the beginning, RO has been allied with retrieving Neoplatonism of a certain kind, namely, the *theurgical* (brought about by supernatural powers) Neoplatonism of Iamblichus (c. A.D. 250-325, a student of Plotinus' disciple Porphyry). Iamblichus wrote the influential treatise *Theurgia*, or *On the Mysteries of Egypt*. RO allies itself with this form of Neoplatonism in order to counter postmodern nihilism and flattened materialism. Why Iamblichus? Because his brand of Neoplatoism in particular serves to counter the reductionism of both nihilism and naturalism. It points instead to a vision of the created order as suspended from the Good that transcends it, but in which the world participates (see II.3.3).[12]

An Overview of RO

The defining elements of RO have already been hinted at in its genealogy. From there we can examine the themes in their proper order.

II.1. Smith says that before we examine what RO *is*, we must be clear regarding what it *isn't*. *First*, RO isn't a new list of infallible Fundamentals, or infallible doctrines constructed to determine who is or is not orthodox. *Second*, the movement explicitly rejects Biblicism and authoritarianism. Instead, it seeks to be concretely ecumenical-- "reformed Catholicism." *Third*, RO is not a nostalgic thirst for a simplistic return to the old paths. Instead, its advocates say they are seeking to rethink tradition as the condition for theological reflection. RO espouses not the pre-modern, but an alternative version of modernity. *Fourth*, although RO draws upon the Eastern Fathers, it should not be confused with Eastern Orthodoxy. *Fifth*, although RO has a program, it is not a monolithic ideology, system, method or formula. Instead, it is a "hermeneutic disposition and a style of metaphysical vision." RO is a "call to look again at things one has too often assumed"[13] to be as they ought. Smith says that RO is "orthodox insofar as it seeks to be unapologetically confessional and Christian; it is radical insofar as it seeks to critically retrieve premodern roots."[14]

II.2. Graham Ward has provided a unifying principle for RO: "Employing the tools of critical reflexivity honed by continental thinking, taking on board the full implications of what has been termed the linguistic turn, Radical Orthodoxy reads the contemporary world through the Christian tradition, weaving it into the narrative of that tradition."[15] To

accomplish this, RO works to retrieve the deep theological resources (*resourcement*) of Christian tradition and to enable them to speak to postmodernity.   It is both *methodology* and *constructive* task.

II.3. Although RO cannot be identified according to a series of doctrines, there are identifiable "movements" as in a Bach or Rachmaninov symphony. There are at least five of them. Space will permit only their identification and a brief description.

II.3.1. A trenchant critique of modernity and liberalism as an internally flawed and imploding project. Modernity gave birth to bogus dualisms that constructed an arbitrary basis for excluding the divine and the transcendent. 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."[16] This "single system" is supposedly autonomous (independent of the sacred) and universally accessible. Modern "reason" was a metaphysic that boasted of its ability to tell us what reality is really like. The postmodern critique of modernity has exposed the hollowness of that claim, and in turn has shown just how conditioned, just how socially and historically "located" the claim was from the start. RO shows just how extensively the dualisms of modernity were "faith based."

Modernity's dualisms, such as the opposition between faith and reason, set the rules by which modern theology was supposed to play. But instead of subscribing to the rules, RO questions and dismisses modernity's ground rules as arbitrary—absent of warrant. RO calls into question the primary assumptions of modernity itself.

The end of modernity also means an end to the modern "predicament of theology."[17] It no longer has to "measure up to accepted secular standards of scientific truth or normative rationality."[18] More clearly than ever before, we can now see how erroneously theological liberalism accommodated itself to modernity rather than grounding itself in revelation. As part of its critique of modernity, RO also assails classical political liberalism for delivering an atomistic account of personal and social existence (e.g., Thomas Hobbes).[19] RO refuses to concede political expertise to the secular. Rather, it attempts "to unfold a distinctive Christian politics (on the order of a Christian socialism, a "socialism by grace").[20]

II.3.2. Rejecting the myth of secularity ("erasing the dreadful consequences of the liberal erasure of God," Blond). By challenging all modern dualisms, RO assails the very notion of secular reason. It rejects modern "orthodoxy" that insists we accept as "true" purportedly objective accounts of life that abandon the sacred and rely wholly upon the secular.

The implications for theology are that RO rejects any notion of theology as simply an internal enterprise of the faithful—the Church *and* theology as adapted to secular limitations. Both have fallen victim to the modern error. RO represents a kind of *via media*; it sets out not only to be confessional as a churchly activity, but also to be publicly confessional, i.e., to render a confessional account of human experience—not just

Christian experience—in all its elements. This includes social theory, aesthetics, and sexuality. Christian research and reflection must engage all the disciplines. It must be unapologetically confessional across all the disciplines and thereby provide a thoroughly Christian account of reality.

II.3.3. An ontological commitment to participation (*methexis*, audience participation, as in Greek theater) as the only proper metaphysical model for understanding creation, particularly the relationship between Creator and creation. Smith says this characteristic constitutes the crescendo of the RO symphony. Champions of RO charge postmodernity, and theological movements that traffic under that banner, with a flatness and materialism that leads finally to nihilism. The path is as follows: so flatten the world that all we have left is the immanent, and the immanent will surely implode upon itself.

How may such nihilism be avoided? Postmodernity alone cannot provide an adequate answer. But Christian faith can and does. In its doctrine of Creator/creation it offers a participatory ontology in which the immanent and material are suspended from the transcendent and immaterial. The Christian model grants meaning to the world—to the immanent and the material. Following Augustine, Catherine Pickstock tells us that created being is nothing (*ouk on*) in and of itself. It *is* more only insofar as it participates in God's gift of existence.[21]

The call for comprehensive Christian reflection noted in the second movement is grounded ontologically in the primal gift of the Creator. Every aspect of the world *participates in*, and *is*, by virtue of God's gift. Every aspect of the world must be examined *as created*, and this means in light of Christ the One through whom creation exists, and in whom it is being redeemed. The material—embodied life, self-expression, sexuality, aesthetic expression, human political community--isn't simply flat and secular, it is the site of revelation, the Incarnation. Christian theology must comprehensively re-describe the world and human life as the real, loving expression of the Creator/Redeemer God.

II.3.4. Sacramentality, liturgy, and aesthetics. Following directly from the first three movements comes the fourth. Given the incarnation of transcendence and a participatory ontology, RO moves to a renewed appreciation for the liturgical or doxological quality of creation and the role liturgy plays in leading us to the divine. With clear echoes from Luther and Tillich, RO celebrates the material and sensible as modes of revelation. Aesthetics and the arts should become media of revelation and worship. Dance, the visual arts, gestures, scent, etc. can become "iconic," or what Tillich called "symbolic," or what Rob Staples called "sacramentalist." RO celebrates embodied modes of worship as means for reflecting the divine (opening the divine to the creation, and us to God). Graham Ward, for example, explores the relationship between aesthetic and religious experience. God reaches us through materiality, and we reach him (respond) through materiality. Liturgy and theology are more fundamental than either language or experience, and yet both are linguistic and experiential.

II.3.5. Cultural critique and transformation. Finally, RO voices a distinctive Christian approach to being-in-the-world. It stresses both God's revelation of himself in the material world and God's concern for the redemption and transformation of his world (socially, politically and economically). RO theologians have so far engaged in sociopolitical reflection upon aesthetics (Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt), incarnation, painting and art (Philip Blond), and music (Pickstock). Critique and transformation of culture roots in RO's understanding of how creation participates in the divine. Not only do *being* and *knowledge* participate in God, the implications for participation should be extended to the entire sphere of human culture and culture making, including history and language. The transformation of culture is part of the creative and redemptive process of the second person of the Trinity. But for Christian faith and theology to foster cultural transformation and creation they must learn to read the signs of the times, e.g., how we invest our cultural capital, in light of the grammar of the Christian faith. Negatively, this necessitates unmasking all cultural idols that oppose God's redemptive activity.[22]

Some Critiques of RO

Not surprisingly, in addition to attracting many supporters, Radical Orthodoxy has elicited numerous criticisms from friends and detractors. We can here identify only some of the most important critiques, without being able to discuss how RO responds to each them.

III. 1. One common critique is that RO lacks a sustained engagement with biblical scholarship. Consequently, doubts are raised regarding is potential for service to the life, worship and witness of the Church.

III. 2. As would be expected, RO's appraisal of the secular has drawn strong protests. James Smith says the protests have mainly come from three directions, each with its own nuance, but all united in their defense of the secular. All three reject RO's dismissal of a natural and neutral secular reason and realm that lie outside the sacred, and outside a Christian narrative that claims to know how things truly are. All three reject the notion that beyond the resources Christian faith offers, no other significant (certainly no autonomous) resources are needed for framing fundamental questions and achieving definitive answers about the world.

The *first* of the three critiques involves history and apologetics (Wayne Hankey and Douglas Hedley). The *second* critique is a deconstructive one (John D. Caputo). And the *third* critique is issued in the name of the secular (Clayton Crocket and Gavin Hyman). All three critiques judge RO to be to be too Christian, too confessional, or too dogmatic.[23] We don't have time to explore the important nuances of each critique. Suffice it to say that each in its own way opposes RO's dismissal of a natural or neutral secular realm.

III.2.1. Hankey and Hedley charge that RO's dismissal of unaided reason, of the secular, and its necessary work pollutes the purity and autonomy of a secular nature. There is a neutral reason shared by all and it must not be tyrannized by theology. Autonomous reason has characterized the whole history of philosophy, not just from modernity on.

Philosophy belongs to nature and it must therefore retain its autonomy. In fact, an autonomous secular reason uncontaminated by confessional theology is the non-negotiable common ground between believer and unbeliever.[24] RO's dismissal of the secular and of autonomous philosophy militates against apologetics, for without neutral reason natural theology would be impossible.

RO foolishly dissolves the noble history of philosophy into theology; it collapses metaphysics into *sacra doctrina*. The yield is an impoverished philosophy. apologetics and theology. The problem with RO is that it confuses nature and grace.[25] Similarly, as we shall see, John Caputo's deconstructive critique of RO is grounded in an unyielding commitment to the Enlightenment's secular project.

III. 2.2. The postmodern philosopher John D. Caputo objects to the dogmatism of RO. The very notion of a "radical orthodoxy," he insists, is incoherent. Both RO and postmodern philosophers such as Caputo and Jacques Derrida critique modernity's notion of objective reason. But for Caputo and the others, post-secular means "passing through" modernity, not "over and out of it." Postmodernity means continuation of the Enlightenment by another means. We still need the "secular" to protect us against the "orthodox," against theological suffocation of liberal values won with great difficulty.

III. 2.3. Crockett's "atheological critique" defines theology as a perpetual question that defies final answers.[26] He advocates Kant's "transcendental critique of theology." Smith says that following Tillich, Altizer, and Gordon Kauffman, Crockett thinks of secularization as *completing* Christianity. Echoing the sentiment of Caputo, Crockett sees RO as another form of "totalizing."

III.3.1. I think R.R. Reno has delivered one of the most penetrating critiques of RO.[27] After an informative introduction to RO, Reno concludes that in spite of the movement's intense critique of modernity and liberal theology's compromise with modernity, it finally falls victim to the same error. In the crunch, RO rejects historic Christian faith for essentially the same reasons that plagued liberal theology. It suffers from a deep-seated "allergy to the particular." This "allergy" (or aversion) makes Radical Orthodoxy "paradigmatically modern when handling such crucial theological questions" as Christ, the atonement, salvation and the Church.

RO is dogged by the problem of "ideality." Whether "the focus rests on Scripture, creed, or tradition, a certain 'ideality' seems to govern, a tendency to think, theologically, in terms of higher, purified, and untainted forms. A formal claim, a 'way of being,' supersedes the determinate particularity of apostolic teaching and practice." Reno adds that "the same implicit repudiation of authoritative particularity occurs when Milbank identifies the Church as a process rather than as a tradition of first–order language and practice."

Hence, RO, like modern liberal theology, is "allergic" to Christian particularity. Reno explains that Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, are Anglicans deeply influenced by the piety

and practice of Anglo–Catholicism. This lineage, Reno says, encourages them to replace particularity with theory, identity with ideality.

Another way of stating the accusation is that RO is plagued by an "implicit repudiation of authoritative particularity" for it moves away from the historically concrete reality of the Christian faith. This can be seen in the way Milbank engages the biblical text. Milbank "consistently translates the particular sense of Scripture into a conceptual or speculative process." The Gospel stories are, for Milbank, "allegories of a participatory metaphysics. As we grasp this theoretical truth, we come to see how we are 'cocreators' of revelatory meaning. Our 'analogizing capacity is itself 'like God.' Rather than being addressed by God, 'we have to discover the content of the infinite through labor and creative effort'."

Reno concludes that for RO, abandoning the particularity of the Christian faith, and embracing the "speculative grasp," is no "quirk of postmodernism, no oddity of an Anglo–Catholic legacy. It is the habit of any theology alienated from the concrete and particular shape of the contemporary Church."

III.3.3. Reno assails RO as embracing a Christology and doctrine of the atonement that falls far short of orthodox Christian faith. He says the RO tendency toward an "ideation" of Christian faith calls for a second critique, this one having to do with Christ's atonement. If Reno is correct, the second critique is even more disturbing than the first. The charge is that RO obscures and supersedes "the particular identity of Jesus Christ as the mediator of salvation." In *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank presents a conceptual reading of the redemptive importance of Jesus. "After Jesus' death our redemption becomes possible, for two reasons. *First*, we speculatively grasp that sin is negation, arbitrary violence, the refusal of pure love itself, and this speculation is an *indispensable* and yet independent moment of faith." Second, "the speculation [by which we grasp that sin is a negation] is only occasioned by the horrifying and sublime compulsion of Jesus' death, whose concrete circumstance makes us feel that here we really 'see' sin, and at the same time the essence of human goodness." Jesus makes possible a reflective pattern; his life is redemptive because the determinate features of his life stimulate us to "speculatively grasp" that pattern. Only through this "speculative grasp" can we inhabit "the idiom, the *logos* of adequate return." By adopting this "idiom," by way of "speculative grasp," and through its resultant new way of thinking and living, *we* make atonement universal.[28]

Far from embracing Christian orthodoxy, Reno says, Milbank's explanation of the atonement is but one more "postmodern combination of theory and rhetoric." Talk of a "speculative grasp" exposes a "general tendency in Radical Orthodoxy to substitute the creative production of theological theory for the redemptive power of Christ." Reno charges that even though RO sets out to renounce the compromises and half–measures of modern theology, and even though it says it wants to recover an Augustinian boldness on behalf of Christian faith and practice, its (Milbank specifically) attempts "to explain our participation in Christ's redemptive power are easily folded back into modern theology."

Reno observes that the faulty Christology RO espouses repeats the old errors of Kant and Hegel, errors from which orthodox Christian faith must maintain its distance. The Christology and soteriology Milbank offers would return the Church to Kantian moralism, to a Jesus who helps us fulfill our human potential. And it would alienate us from the Scriptures because for Milbank the New Testament cannot adequately render Jesus present.

So, Reno concludes, in spite of RO's pronounced desire to serve Christian orthodoxy in a postsecular world, it finally falls into the same old errors that plagued liberal theology. It demonstrates an "overall ambivalence about the role of Scripture, creed, and inherited ecclesial practice that moves in a modernist direction."[29]

III.4. The fourth critique to be noted comes from Mark C. Mattes who offers a Lutheran appraisal of RO. His survey of RO highlights the many ways the movement can benefit our articulation of the Christian faith in light of the "end" of modernity and in response to postmodern philosophy. But Mattes then targets theological errors that threaten important parts of the Christian faith, and which reveal RO's limited usefulness for the Church and Christian theology. Mattes says that from a Lutheran perspective RO fails on five levels (Wesleyans would not agree with points one and three of Mattes' critique without some qualification). (1) It is Pelagian, or semi-Pelagian at best, because it relies upon Aristotelian activism and a Kantian emphasis upon human potential rather than upon receptivity before the God who alone authors faith; (2) it has a disjunctive approach to the relationship between Church and society. It is too quick to deny God's work at all in the "city of man, despite the fact that people can be vehicles of God's creative and healing work whether they have allegiance to God or not." Milbank "inflates the church, such that one almost thinks that it is no longer a creature of the word, a vessel of the divine that is hidden from the world, but somehow the kingdom already come or coming in its fullness:" (3) its catholic sectarianism, because RO doesn't recognize the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms; (4) its view of language as codification of behavior, not proclamation. Milbank fails to recognize the "address character" of language, which likewise renders humans passive. . . . language can be proclamation in which God through his preachers claims us as his own. As address, the Word exposes our self-justifying behaviors and ideologies. Our external behavior as Christians grows out of our proper narrative identity as children of God"; and (5) its view of participation as a "theology of glory" as opposed to the "theology of the cross." Mattes says that Milbank "seeks to establish a continuum between the human and the divine that overlooks the biblical sense of God's sheer holiness and otherness. Milbank's revision of God obstructs an encounter with the Wholly Other One before whom we must take off our shoes because we stand on holy ground.[30]

These and other critiques must be carefully considered. They provoke considerable caution when asking how we may beneficially appropriate the work of the RO theologians. Nevertheless, I believe the RO theologians are sufficiently speaking in support of the Christian message in a postmodern, pluralistic world to warrant our careful study and appreciation. It is hard to imagine a child of apostolic Christianity not responding favorably to RO's surgical exposure of diseased modern atheism in its various

mutations, and its call for thoughtful and stalwart Christian witness. I hope that some of you will pursue this enquiry with specific reference to the role of Wesleyan theology in the Orient.

Bibliography

James K.A. Smith and Shannon Schutt Nason maintain a selective Radical Orthodox bibliography. It was last updated February 27, 2006. It is available @ www.calvin.edu/~jks4/ro/robib.pdf

[1] See for instance how Milbank argues in "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A Short *Summa* in Forty-two Responses to Unasked Questions," in The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader, ed. Graham Ward (Blackwell, 1997), 265.

[2] James K.A. Smith, Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology (Baker Academic/Paternoster, 2004).

[3] Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism," 265-278.

[4] John Milbank's Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason (Blackwell, 1993; see also *The Word Made Strange* (Blackwell, 1997).

[5] John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham wards, eds., Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology, London: Routledge, 1999.

[6] .Graham Ward, Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory: Creating Transcendent Worship, 2nd ed., NY: St. Martin's Press, 1999. In this work Ward gives an exposition of French thinkers that include Derrida, Foucault, Irigaray, Ricoeur, Julia Kristeva, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Michael de Certeau. See also Ward's, The Postmodern God, Blackwell, 1997, and The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology, 2001.

[7] Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism," 265-6. "Postmodernism seems to imply nihilism, albeit of a 'positive' kind, embracing contingency and arbitrariness as the real natural good," 267. Radical Orthodoxy can show that nihilism results, but it will not try to "prove" the superiority of the Christian God. Instead, the Christian response should be one of practice, i.e., practicing a form of life that shows a way out of nihilism. "The Christian God can no longer be thought of as a God first seen, but rather as a God first prayed to, first imagined, first inspiring certain actions. . ." 267.

[8] Although Karl Rahner is included in this criticism, I think it is unwarranted.

[9] Better described as a "French theological revival." For an introduction to *la nouvelle théologie* see Marcellino D'Ambrosio, "Resourcement Theology, Aggiornamento, and the Hermeneutics of Tradition," Communio 18 (Winter 1991). ©1991 by Communio International Catholic Review http://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/library_article/54/Ressourcement_Theology__Aggiornamento_and_the_Hermeneutics_of_Tradition.html

"la nouvelle théologie" was a label derisively given by its opponents. What united this diverse group were the convictions that: 1) theology had to speak to the Church's present situation, and that 2) the key to theology's relevance to the present lay in the creative recovery of its past. In other, words, they all saw clearly that the first step to what later came to be known as *aggiornamento* had to be *ressourcement*ó--a rediscovery of the riches of the Church's two-thousand-year treasury, a return to the very headwaters of the Christian tradition

[10] Smith, Introducing radical Orthodoxy

[11] While John Milbank credits Karl Rahner with spawning the liberation theology of Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, and Juan Luis Segundo, he says that Rahner's theology and liberation theology (which is based upon an uncritical acceptance of the findings of Marxist social theory) are ultimately a Tubingin-inspired, dualistic project of correlation that assumes the legitimacy of a real distinction between the secular and the sacred. Liberation Theology as framed by these theologians is a "colony of Tubingen." Their theology of the political remains trapped in the secular-sacred dualism (Smith), 45.

[12] Smith, 48-49.

[13] Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology, 2.

[14] Smith, 66.

[15] Graham Ward, "Radical Orthodoxy and/as Cultural Politics," 106.

[16] Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism," 265.

[17] *Ibid*.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] Simply and with qualification, Milbank says that "a predominantly secular culture will only sustain the neo-liberal catastrophe." Milbank says that "liberal democracy can itself devolve into a mode of tyranny". One of the reasons is "an intrinsic indifference to truth, as opposed to majority opinion, [which means that] in practice the manipulation of opinion will usually carry the day. Then governments tend to discover that the manipulation of fear is more effective than the manipulation of promise. . . ." (John Milbank, "Liberality versus Liberalism") http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/copt/johnMilbank.2.doc
 .

[20] Smith, 80, Ward, "Radical Orthodoxy and/as Cultural Politics," 103-4). In "Liberality versus Liberalism" Milbank discusses what a "socialism by grace" might begin to look like. It would be "less wedded to progress, historical inevitability, materialism and the State," and it would "refer beyond itself to transcendent norms" {Milbank, "Liberality versus Liberalism").

[21] Catherine Pickstock, "Reply to David Ford and Guy Collins" (as quoted by James K.A. Smith, 75).

[22] Graham Ward, "Radical Orthodoxy and/as Cultural Politics," 97-11 (as referred to by Smith, 79).

[23] Smith, 50.

[24] Douglas Hedley, "Should Divinity Overcome Metaphysics? Reflections on John Milbank's Theology beyond Secular Reason and Confessions of a Cambridge Platonist," Journal of Religion 80 [2000]: 275 (as referred to by Smith, 52).

[25] Wayne J. Hankey, "Why Philosophy Abides for Aquinas," <u>Heythrop Journal</u> 42 [2001], 329-48 (as referred to by Smith, p. 52).

[26] Crockett, <u>A Theology of the Sublime,</u> (Routledge, 2001), 1 (as referred to by Smith, 56-7).

[27] R.R. Reno, "The Radical Orthodoxy Project," <u>First Things</u> 100 (February 2000): 37-44.

[28] I refer you to Milbank's discussion of the relationship between "second order" "speculative discourse" in the New Testament that exercises a "regulative function" over the "first-order" language of "historical" narrative recitation which presents a "mythical picture of God" as "becoming incarnate" and "suffering in our stead." Even the "second-order" speculative considerations implying incarnation and atonement are "somewhat excessive." (in a positive sense). The "second-order" language "insinuates itself" back into the "first-order" historical narrative. Using metaphors and mythical "metanarratives" that imply incarnation and atonement, "second-order" language suggests a particular "mythical" picture of God as becoming incarnate, suffering in our stead. "Nothing justifies this speculation except itself, and the way it then enriches the stories told, and redoubles the perceived significance of Christian practices" ("Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A Short *Summa* in Forty-two Responses to Unasked Questions," 272).

[29] R.R. Reno, "The Radical Orthodoxy Project," <u>First Things</u> 100 [February 2000]: 37-44.

[30] Mark C. Mattes, "Review Essay: A Lutheran Assessment of 'Radical Orthodoxy'," <u>Lutheran Quarterly</u> Autumn, Volume XV, Number 3 (2001).