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THE CHURCH AS EMANCIPATORY POLITICAL PROJECT: SOME POINTERS FROM POLITICAL THEOLOGY FOR THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Abstract

The paper asks what it might mean to speak of the Church as 'emancipatory political project' and considers what scope there is to say this in the so-called secular university. It does so through an examination of the writing of three 'radical orthodox' theologians, namely Daniel Bell, William Cavanaugh, and John Milbank, exploring what they have to say about the Church as a possible vehicle for emancipation. Radical orthodox theologians have been criticised for idealising the Church, loading too much on it, and creating a gulf between Church and world. However, what the paper finds is that while such dangers exist, there is more humility in radical orthodoxy's ecclesiology than first meets the eye. The paper is written against the backdrop of the author's own experience as an academic in development politics and as a priest in the inner city.

Keywords: *the church, secular university, radical orthodoxy, emancipation.*

Abstract

Introduction

In 2010, I was ordained in the Church of England and began working as a 'self-supporting' curate in an inner city parish. The path that led me to this place was a fairly circuitous one but substantively saw me working as an academic in the discipline of politics in the fifteen years prior to this. My specialism is the politics of development with expertise on South East Asia, particularly Vietnam where I have spent a significant part of my adult life. Despite my interest in politics, I have never been a very good activist. I have never joined a political party. I am not a member of

a trade union. Indeed, I have frequently struggled to exercise my right to vote for fear that to do so suggests that I am buying into something that I am uncertain about. Of course, I am aware of all the counter-arguments that well-meaning friends roll out when I admit to having not voted but I have never found them very convincing, seeing them instead as the kind of things political elites say to keep us in line. It was therefore with some surprise, and puzzlement, that soon after I began my curacy I found myself quite naturally using the language of 'emancipatory political project' to describe the Church, and moreover realising that for all my reticence as a political activist, the Church was a sphere where I felt more comfortable seeing myself as adopting an 'activist' stance – whatever this means exactly.

At the same time, as I worked at being a curate, pedalling back and forth on my bicycle between parish and university, I started to feel that something had changed in terms of my place in the university. This was not so much about what it means to be a priest in the so-called secular university, although clearly I have reflected on this, but more than that I found myself wanting to say things in social science seminars, or when teaching students, that I wasn't sure that I could say because of assumptions about what constituted 'legitimate' knowledge or behaviour in the academy – assumptions which I am fairly certain I don't agree with. So, for example, I remember one seminar where the discussion took a turn along the lines of possible responses to a particular political context and I found myself thinking, although on this occasion not saying, that the Church as an 'emancipatory political project' had something to say here – again whatever this means exactly.

This paper seeks to respond to both the points raised above, asking firstly what it might mean to speak of the Church as 'emancipatory political project', and secondly considering what scope there is to say this in the so-called secular university, and to the extent that the space is in some way constrained exploring what might be done to widen it. These questions seem important for three reasons: firstly because of a deep sense that the world is in need of emancipation (and not just because of recent financial crises); secondly because of a sense that our existing politics – either reformist or more radical – is not capable of delivering on this emancipation ('we've been here too often before'); and thirdly because of a sense that if there really is some

kind of ecclesial alternative 'out there' it ought to gain a hearing in the University – even a self-identifying secular one – if only as a precursor to wider proselytisation.

The paper connects with my earlier work in politics where I have recently clarified my sense of the failures of liberal politics. In a paper entitled 'Liberal interventionism and the global north: the case of Britain's inner cities', I compared interventions in the name of development in the global south with interventions designed to tackle urban poverty and deprivation in the global north, arguing that they are all part of the same liberal impulse to govern. Moreover, in this account, liberalism has a dark side. That is, instead of delivering on the freedom which is constantly invoked, there is rather a sense of 'external imposition' whether it is the aid industry or the welfare state, communities are constantly 'acted upon' ('done violence to'), with their own preferences ignored and frequently belittled by people who purport to know better and by a system which feeds off the very problem it is said to be addressing. Consequently, as many have argued albeit for diverse reasons, the aid industry is incapable of reforming itself while the 'new dawns' of urban renewal so often promised when new governments come to power in the US or UK always ultimately disappoint (Gainsborough 2011).

While such an interpretation may seem overly harsh or sweeping for those perhaps used to viewing 'development' or 'the caring professions' simply as being about 'helping others', it draws on a rich and sophisticated literature, which seeks to highlight the power dynamics implicit in any notion of 'helping' people (Cameron and Palan 2004; Duffield 2007; Levitas 1998/2005; Pupavac 2005; Rose 1999). Moreover, a useful way to clarify the nature of the critique is to note that it is not primarily an argument about the good faith or otherwise of individuals engaged in 'development' or working in the caring professions but rather it is one which shifts the emphasis onto the material and ideational effects of the liberal *system* which embodies such activity. Put another way, while I may be doing my best to alleviate suffering, I may be working within a system which has consequences which I cannot see, and in which the system itself dulls my ability to see them. It should, however, be noted that this is quite a generous interpretation!

It is in response to this critique of the liberal developmental project that this paper is framed, exploring what political theology has to offer in terms of a way out of this an-emancipatory political impasse. Clearly, there has been a huge amount of writing in this area, which I have scarcely begun to get to grips with. What I propose to do therefore is to take a selected and limited number of texts of three writers, namely Daniel Bell, William Cavanaugh, and John Milbank exploring what they have to say in this area. In particular, I am interested in what they have to say about the Church as a possible vehicle for emancipation.

As is well known, these writers are all associated with the so-called 'radical orthodox' current in theology, and by extension a post-liberal current in theology going back to people like Soren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth and more recently George Lindbeck, Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas. The latter post-liberal current appears to connect well with where I have got to in terms of my own thinking about theology and development, hence my desire to investigate it. However, radical orthodox theologians have also been widely criticised for idealising the Church, loading too much on it, and creating a gulf between Church and world. In addition, their emancipatory vision has been labelled by some as oppressive – even imperialistic – and for some arguably just as oppressive as the liberal politics it seeks to replace (Chapman 2003; Shakespeare 2007). Part of what I want to do therefore is to examine the ideas of Bell, Cavanaugh and Milbank in relation to these criticisms, considering whether or not they are justified.

The paper is written against the backdrop of my ongoing work as a priest in the inner city. I am therefore also interested in whether the ideas of these three theologians are fit for purpose in this context, particularly whether the three theologians in question have anything useful to say about how the local church should engage with the (liberal) powers that be, which it comes in contact with on a regular basis and which it seems problematic to write off.

The paper proceeds as follows. It first look at the ideas of Bell, Cavanaugh and Milbank individually, teasing out their understanding of the Church and its role as a vehicle for emancipation. It then consider what collectively this adds up to by way of a response to the failings of liberal politics, notably how the ideas of these

theologians relate to my own critique of liberal politics. Furthermore, the paper returns to the question of whether these theologians fall foul of the criticisms levelled at them and/or have traction 'on the ground' in the inner city. Finally, the paper considers what kind of reception such ideas might be expected to receive in the 'secular' university, particularly thinking of the social sciences, exploring, where necessary, what might be done to improve this reception. Any originality in this paper is likely to lie less in my presentation of the ideas of Bell, Cavanaugh, and Milbank and more in how I manipulate them to connect with debates about liberal failure in the social and political sciences, including my own work in this area.

We now turn to the first of my chosen interlocutors, namely William Cavanaugh.

Cavanaugh

William Cavanaugh is Assistant Professor of Theology at the University of St Thomas, a Catholic 'liberal arts' university in Minnesota. He studied for his PhD at Duke University under Stanley Hauerwas, and is the author of *Torture and the Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body of Christ* (1998) and numerous articles, including (evocatively) 'Killing for the Telephone Company: Why the Nation-State is Not the Keeper of the Common Good' (2004). The two pieces of writing on which I will focus here are a chapter on the Church in the *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (2004) and his chapter in the edited book *Radical Orthodoxy* (1999) entitled 'The City: Beyond Secular Parodies'.

In his chapter in the *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, Cavanaugh is concerned with the present-day tendency to see the Church as, at best, an *indirectly* political body: that is, as an institution which *acts on* the political sphere *from the outside* but not a political body per se. This, he points out, was not how it always was, and is a development,, which represents the marginalisation of the Church as associated with secularisation. At one time, Cavanaugh notes, the Church was seen as *the* universal body encompassing <u>all</u> in the way that the state has assumed that mantle now. Today, meanwhile, it is the Church which is seen as a "particular association" within the whole (i.e. the state), and usually as just another organisation in 'civil society'. Moreover, Cavanaugh says – correctly, I believe – that this view of

the Church and its relationship to the political is frequently accepted even by those who would say they do not accept the Enlightenment story of secularisation (Cavanaugh 2004: 393).

What Cavanaugh seeks to do in this chapter is to point the way towards reclaiming this lost ground by asserting the directly political nature of the Church. To do this, he argues *against* what he refers to as the separation of secular and salvation history and asserts that the Church is indispensible to the history of salvation. "Key to this approach," Cavanaugh argues, "is reimagining the political as a direct response to God's activity in the world, a return to the Augustinian conviction that politics is truly politics only when mapped onto salvation history." (2004: 403)

That we find it so difficult today to conceive of the Church as a directly political body, Cavanaugh says, is because of our tendency to see the Church simply as a "gathering of individuals" who are seen to be the subject of salvation. Cavanaugh says that this is mistaken and that scripture shows us that salvation is "fundamentally social":

> "Salvation is a fully public event that unfolds in historical time before the watching eyes of the nations. Salvation is not a matter of pulling a few individual survivors from the wreckage of creation after the Fall, but is about the re-creation of a new heaven and a new earth…The history of salvation is not told separately from the history of politics." (Cavanaugh 2004: 394)

It is against this backdrop that we get Cavanaugh's assessment of how he understands the Church, which he describes variously as: a "community of people" that offers a "foretaste of salvation" (2004: 394); as a "concrete community which is to live differently"; and as a "visible eschatological sign of God's plan of salvation for all creation" (2004: 396). Continuing, he quotes Hauerwas saying that the Church is called to be a 'contrast model' to remind the world of what it is not (2004: 404). There are a number of other themes within this. Firstly, there is a familiar (in radical orthodoxy) emphasis on the importance of liturgy, with the assertion that the 'world constructed in liturgy' is more reliable and credible than the world 'out there'. Secondly, there is an emphasis on the importance of non-violence for the Church with

Cavanaugh criticising the nation-state as being based on "the arbitrary suppression of will by will" precisely, he says, because of the "autonomy of politics from God's rule" which has emerged with the sense that the Church and politics inhabit different spaces (2004: 404). We will come back to the issue of violence/non-violence later in the paper.

Cavanaugh ends this chapter by offering a number of caveats in relation to his depiction of the Church. Firstly, he says that since the Church – and Israel before it – have often not looked very different from any other community, the history of salvation needs to be told in a penitential key. In this respect, he emphasises the 'not yet' of salvation, saying that while we can boast in Christ we should not boast in the Church (Galatians 6: 14). Cavanaugh is also at pains to stress that the Church, as he understands it, is a 'mixed body', with unclear boundaries between it and the world, containing saints and sinners, and with room for marginal voices and conflicts. His final comment is that the Church, nevertheless, "muddles through" (2004: 405).

Cavanaugh's chapter in *Radical Orthodoxy* – i.e. the second chapter we are looking at – helpfully builds on what we have just heard. In particular, it offers greater clarity in terms of how we have got to the situation today whereby the Church is seen as existing *outside* politics and at best acting indirectly on it. Cavanaugh also offers greater insight in this second chapter into what he regards as the failings of the liberal state and hence how he envisages the Church offering something different and distinct.

To get at these issues, it is necessary to focus on Cavanaugh's argument that the state – like the Church – offers a promise of salvation but that its soteriology (i.e doctrine of salvation) is a false copy of the one offered by the Church (Cavanaugh 1999: 182). Cavanaugh builds up his argument around the idea that both the Church and the state offer different foundational stories about the nature of humanity. The Christian story, Cavanaugh says, rests on "the assumption of primal unity in the creation story" with the idea being that redemption will come through a restoration of that unity through participation in Christ's body (1999: 184). In making this argument, Cavanaugh again invokes Augustine – and specifically *The City of God* – saying that "it is the Church, uniting earth and heaven, which is the 'true politics'." (1999: 185)

By contrast, Cavanaugh says, the state story is very different. Rather than an essential unity, the emphasis is on a fallen state of nature for humankind – an essential individuality of the human race. Government, or Leviathan, is therefore needed to 'save us from each other'. The result, Cavanaugh says, is two very different accounts of freedom. In the Genesis' account, true freedom is participation in God with other human beings whereas the inheritance of the secular state going (at least) as far back as Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau emphasises our individuality. That is, what the liberal notion that humans are born free actually means is that we are born free from one another (Cavanaugh 1999: 186-190).

Cavanaugh goes further and says that while the story of the emergence of the modern state is usually told in terms of a need for the state to ensure peace between warring religious factions, it was in fact more a case that in a struggle for power the emerging state simply needed to defeat the Church as a rival body. Cavanaugh says that Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau all agreed on the need to 'domesticate the body of Christ in order to produce unity' and that it was this that eventually led to the elimination of the Church body as a rival to the state body, and the redefinition of religion as something to be tolerated as long as it remained a 'private matter' (1999: 190-192).

For Cavanaugh, it is these diverse stories which underpin the differences between the Church's and the state soteriology, and his conviction that the latter cannot deliver. Cavanaugh makes three points in particular. Firstly, he says that what he calls the 'state mythos' is based on a 'theological' anthropology which precludes any truly social process. i.e. the idea that we participate in one another through God is replaced by the idea that we are the bearer of individual rights. Secondly, state soteriology, Cavanaugh says, has tried to unify humankind by incorporating it into a "body of a perverse sort", namely individuals with no common ends such that the best the state can do is to stop people interfering in each other's rights. Finally, he says that while the state promises peace it has brought violence: "In the absence of shared ends, individuals relate to each other by means of contract which assumes a guarantee by force" (1999: 194). In fact, he says that for the liberal state violence is the state's *religio* (1999: 192-198).

But what of Christianity and the Church? Cavanaugh is very clear that the Christian story is "fundamentally at odds" with state soteriology which he says offers a false unity and a false peace (1999: 190). He also says that it ought to be obvious that "state power is the last thing that the Church should want" and that any attempt to overcome the privatisation of Christianity through attempts – direct or indirect – to influence the state "is next to futile" (1999: 194). Instead, he proposes the Eucharist as a practice which challenges the false order of the state and points to an alternative. Specifically, he says the Eucharist is where notions of "mine and thine" are "radically effaced", that in the Eucharist one is united not just to God but to one another – i.e. there is no liberal body in which a 'centre' seeks to maintain the independence of individuals from each other – and that the Eucharist also redefines who your fellow citizens are. In making these arguments, Cavanaugh places heavy emphasis on 'the local' level (i.e. 'local communities of formation and decision-making'), which he says is "necessarily [and destructively] subsumed" under the universalising tendencies of the state. The Eucharist, Cavanaugh says, 'celebrates' the local while at the same time also 'effacing' "the antithesis of local and universal" (1999: 193 and 196). Cavanaugh concludes by saying that he does not want to idealise the actual practice of the Eucharist in our "divided Churches" but that he does want to show that the state *mythos* is a "distortion of our true hope and that the Christian tradition provides resources for resistance" (1999: 194-198).

Let us now look at the ideas of Daniel Bell.

Bell

Daniel Bell is Professor of Theological Ethics at the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in South Carolina. He is also an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church. Bell has written two books: *Liberation Theology After the End of History* (2001) and *Just War as Christian Discipleship: Recentering the Tradition in the Church Rather than the State* (2009). For the purposes of this paper, it is Bell's chapter in the edited book, *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (2005), which I am going to look at. The chapter is titled: 'Only Jesus Saves: Towards a Theopolitical Ontology of Judgement'.

In ‘Only Jesus Saves’, Bell’s focus is not on the state – at least not directly – but rather on capitalism. Specifically, Bell is interested in how to “open up a space of liberation” from what he calls “the bondage of savage capitalism.” (Bell 2005: 202) Drawing heavily on Gilles Deleuze, and arguing that neither social democracy nor actually existing socialism have ever proven themselves up to the task of liberation, he says that the struggle against capitalism needs to be waged at the level of ontology if it is to stand a chance of success (or more specifically ‘only a robustly theological ontology can be the basis of resistance and hope’) (2005: 200-202). What Bell is asserting here is that part of capitalism’s strength lies in the way in which it captures and subverts the way we think, “tempt[ing] us,” in Bell’s words “to a pessimism that severs the nerve of liberative practice” (2005: 203). Recognising that part of capitalism’s power is ontological, Bell says that this is also where it is weak:

> “In other words, that capitalism is an ontological and not merely economic discipline does not mean that its victory is in fact total; rather the ontological nature of the struggle broadens opportunities for resistance insofar as it opens up a plethora of fronts on which capitalism may be contested.” (2005: 205)

How this is to occur, Bell says – again drawing on Deleuze – is through attempting to overwhelm capitalism’s ability to capture and adapt desire to the logic of the market (2005: 205-06). Thus, the path beyond capitalism, he says, is not so much one that destroys capitalism so much as one that exceeds it (2005: 206). However, for Bell, Deleuze ultimately fails to offer a way forward and he instead turns to a re-reading of Anselm on the atonement, suggesting that the end of judgement that Christ’s death on the cross inaugurates offers a space of liberation (2005: 212-213). To do this, Bell distances himself from a ‘penal substitution’ reading of Anselm, which says it was necessary for Christ to die on the cross to “satisfy” divine justice. This, he says, is a misreading of Anselm based on an economic logic of debt, lack and loss. In contrast, Bell says that God needs nothing, does not demand bloodshed, and cannot be diminished by human sinfulness (2005: 212-213).

> “God became human not to satisfy an infinite debt, but so that humanity might be restored to the place of honor that God from the beginning intended for humanity, namely participation in divine life. The injury to God’s honour that

> is effected by sin is a matter of the absence of humanity from full communion with its creator. Thus, rightly understood, God's honour is not a barrier to humanity's reconciliation with God, one that creates an infinite debt; rather it is the origin of God's free act to provide humanity with a path to renewed communion." (2005: 212)

Thus, Bell says, it is a false story to say that we are faced with an economic logic of debt, lack and loss, and instead suggests the emphasis should rather be placed on an "aneconomic logic of charity, plenitude, and ceaseless generosity" – what he calls "the judgement of God as the end of judgement" and he says "the grounds of hope for being free of the bondage of capital" (2005: 213).

In advancing this argument, Bell goes to some lengths to be sure that this notion of the 'judgement of God as the end of judgement' – and hence a source of hope – is not simply yet another totalising discourse imposed from above, and ultimately involving a loss of freedom (2005: 215). Here, Bell asserts the importance of an analogical (as opposed to a univocal or equivocal) view of God, saying that only the analogy of being allows difference to be maintained between human beings and God while preserving (and in the case of the human enhancing) the freedom of both:

> "…the analogy of being does not posit God and humanity on a single plane, with the result that they are not locked in a sort of zero-sum competition as the act or will of one delimits the freedom of act or will of the other…Here, finally, is desire, not disciplined and defeated but healed and set free…" (2005: 217)

In light of this argument, it is worth focusing on where the Church fits into Bell's analysis. Posing the question 'how do we join the dance?', Bell notes that the orthodox answer would be through the Church called at Pentecost (2005: 217). However, Bell seems dissatisfied with this, preferring instead to put the emphasis less on the Church and its liturgy of the Eucharistic per se, and more on "the servant" who enacts other "nonidentical representations of the one true sacrifice", thereby extending its effects (2005: 218). What exactly Bell means here is not entirely clear. However, it seems to point towards a notion of sacrificial behaviour on the part of the

individual Christian in the broad sphere of their lives as well as, or in addition to, participation in Eucharistic liturgy.

In answering the question of how such sacrifices portend the fall of capital, Bell says that paradoxically Christ's sacrifice/God's judgement are revealed to be nonjudgement precisely because it refuses to record debts or exact compensation.

> "Christ set us free from infinite judgement and finite justice insofar as his true sacrifice inaugurates a flow of forgiveness…The sacrifice of Christ, and hence of those who follow him, does not belong to an economy that forces one to decide between self and neighbour, with a decision for one necessarily entailing a loss of the other. To the contrary, Christ's sacrifice births an aneconomic space where the divine plentitude spills over with the result that sacrifice becomes gain…and we can give ourselves as a gift of love to our neighbors without end and without loss" (2005: 219-220).

Thus, through Christ's sacrifice a path is opened up, he says, beyond "the iron cage of sin, of capitalism, and of the Hobbesian/Weberian world where both appear to rule", and where we move away from a view of the world focused on the rights of individuals competing with each other for private ends (2005: 222).

I now turn to John Milbank to consider the extent to which his ideas chime with or depart from those already expressed.

Milbank

John Milbank is Professor in Religion, Politics and Ethics and Director of the Centre of Theology and Philosophy at the University of Nottingham. He is arguably the best known of the so-called radical orthodox theologians, with a huge corpus of writing behind him. He is also perhaps the hardest to read (hence leaving him to last!). For the purposes of this paper, I am going to focus my attention on just three sections of Milbank's landmark book, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (1990/2006), namely the introduction, chapter 12, and the preface to the second edition.

Given the depth, breadth and complexity of *Theology and Social Theory*, it is not easy to encapsulate what the book is about in a single sentence. It is also a book which benefits from frequent re-reading, and one suspects, lends itself towards multiple interpretations. That said, it is possible to discern a number of key themes on which I will focus now.

One (fairly obvious) way to start to try and encapsulate what Milbank is seeking to do with *Theology and Social Theory* is to draw attention to his desire to unseat the hold of secular reason on the contemporary sensibility, to undermine any sense of its neutrality, or notion that it rests on firm foundations, and further to argue that secular reason is based on a certainly unattractive and arguably 'false' (on radical orthodoxy's terms) ontology. From this initial statement, it is possible to branch out a little.

When Milbank takes aim at secular reason, he is also taking aim at liberalism (and neo-liberalism), the secular state, which for Milbank is the bearer of this erroneous ontology, and also capitalist economic relations – although how precisely they all relate to each other is worth a paper in its own right. At the same time, Milbank is deeply critical of much contemporary theology – and Church practice – which in his view has conceded far too much ground to secular liberalism. Furthermore, early on in *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank draws attention to a paradoxical state of affairs, whereby theology "accepts secularisation and the autonomy of secular reason" but social theory "finds secularisation paradoxical". "Political theology," Milbank says, "is intellectually atheistic; post-Nietzschean social theory suggests the inescapability of worship." (Milbank 1990/2006: 3). What we then get in *Theology and Social Theory* is an attempt to show how the ideas of secular liberalism arose (i.e. 'they have a beginning and therefore potentially can have an end') and in turn an attempt to point the way to an alternative, and notably an alternative where the Church is centre stage.

Before I move to try flesh this out, it is worth saying one more thing about the nature of *Theology and Social Theory*. In large part, the book is an extended treatise on the nature of reality and how we know anything. In this regard, it is worth noting the

post-liberal nature of Milbank's theology and what this means. Drawing on Lindbeck, Milbank says that a post-liberal theology must reject two forms of "foundationalism" (1990/2006: 384). Firstly, it must reject the idea that faith is grounded on a series of propositions about objects – such as God, soul, incarnate divinity – available to our "rationale gaze" and "proven by miraculous events or fulfilment of prophecies" (1990/2006: 384). Secondly, a post-liberal theology must reject the notion that Christian beliefs are somehow 'expressions' of experiences entirely preceding these beliefs (1990/2006: 384). That is, our 'experiences' and what we view as our 'beliefs' are much more interrelated than we think.

With this as the backdrop, a post-liberal theology places heavy emphasise on narrative (i.e. the stories we tell, say, about Christ), and on practice, notably the practice of the Church, which is the body of Christ. Asked how one decides between rival narratives (or rival ontologies), Milbank simply says that it is a decision about which story is more attractive (1990/2006: 386).

For a post-liberal theology, doctrine is also viewed as resting on more flimsy foundations than is sometimes thought. Milbank describes doctrine as a "speculative moment" where a pronouncement is made with regard to doubts that neither narrative nor practice clearly resolve (1990/2006: 386). While there is clearly a vast amount more to be said about how all this works – not least how narrative and practice interrelate and their relationship to our experiences and beliefs – the point is that Milbank is not trying to prove the truth of Christianity or conversely assert the falsehood of secular liberalism (i.e. he is not engaging in apologetics). Rather, it seems that for a post-liberal theology it is more a case of who has the more attractive foundational story about what it is to be human.

In many respects, there is a great deal of overlap between the ideas contained in *Theology and Social Theory*, which was written first, and the writing of Bell and Cavanaugh – ground which I have already covered. Thus, Milbank also draws heavily on Augustine, stressing two very different notions of freedom. He too seeks to show how in relation to these very different foundational accounts of the nature of humanity that the notion of 'the secular', ideas of 'church' and 'state' as separate

spheres, and of 'politics' outside of 'the Church' – none of which at one time existed – emerged. Milbank also talks about the violence of secular liberalism.

It is in relation to Milbank's assertion that secular liberalism is ultimately founded on violence that it is worth probing in more detail since it arguably finds fuller expression in *Theology and Social Theory* than the other texts I have looked at. Again drawing on Augustine but in a way which is clearly analogous for secular liberalism, Milbank highlights Augustine's contrast between the peace of Rome understood as the victory of a dominant force over other forces, and a real peace, which is a state of harmonious agreement, based upon a common love, and a realisation of justice for all. The peace of Rome, Milbank tells us, is only an apparent peace: "but an arbitrary limitation of a preceding state of anarchic conflict" which is assumed to be ontological prior (1990/2006: 393). Moreover, ideas of legality and legal order can also be justified, Milbank says, because of this same assertion that we need protecting from each other, which he argues can also be traced back to the arbitrary limitation of violence by violence, present in the Roman city and inherited by the liberal state (1990/2006: 392-395).

Milbank further talks about violence in a way which shows he understands it more broadly than the use of physical force. "Violence must be deemed to occur wherever we are 'forced' without true reason to do something, even when we may appear to do it willingly, for very often we are manipulated." (1990/2006: 401) He even goes as far as seeming to suggest that any kind of 'persuasion' can be seen as violence – a denial of freedom. Punishment too is equated with violence (and never occupied by God). "For every time we punish, or utter a judgement against someone held in our power, we deny that person's freedom and spiritual equality: she does not have equal rights to speak about or act against *our* sins" (1990/2006: 427)

It is in response to this violence at the heart of secular liberalism that Christianity tells a different story, and offers a different way, an emancipatory way, Milbank argues. Only a properly theological vision is able to challenge the hegemony of neo-liberalism, he says (1990/2006: xi). It is here also that we can see the importance Milbank attaches to the Church as the means to realising that emancipation. But how does Milbank understand the Church? And why the Church?

For Milbank, the Church is to be understood as: “an exemplary form of human community” (1990/2006: 390); an “always ‘other governed’ rather than autonomous human community” (1990/2006: xxxi); “the lived project of universal reconciliation”; “a peaceful, reconciled social order, beyond even the violence of legality”; a place where one practices non-violence (‘where it becomes more than just an idea’) (1990/2006: 401); as an “asylum, a house of refuge” from the enactment of punishment (even while recognising its “tragic necessity”) (428); “a social space where a different, forgiving and restitutionary practice is pursued”, where we acknowledge that an individual’s sin is “never his alone”; and “a space…where truly just economic exchanges occur” such that the space where arbitrary, unjust exchange “might recede” (1990/2006: 428).

At the same time, Milbank wishes to emphasis that his ecclesiology is “not simply…the imagination of an ecclesial ideal” but rather one which is concerned with “the actual genesis of real historical churches” (1990/2006: 383). In this respect, he does not spare the Church from criticism, is quick to point out the way in which has been complicit in the emergence of a secular liberal worldview and that even now continues to pander to it. And yet, for Milbank, the Church, while not a utopia, is not reducible to its institutional failures (1990/2006: xxxi). In addition, Milbank wants us to view the Church as a ‘nomad city’ “without a site or walls or gates” (1990/2006: 394), “where the lines between Church and world, spiritual and secular are blurred” (1990/2006: 413). In this respect, he looks favourably on the ‘base communities’ of liberation theology days (although not necessarily on liberation theology itself – see Bell 2001).

On the question of how it might help to imagine peace as the primary reality in a world ridden with conflict, Milbank says: “It helps, because it allows us to rethink the necessity of violence, and exposes the manner in which the assumption of an inhibition of an always prior violence helps to preserve violence in motion.” (1990/2006: 416). But it helps more, Milbank says, because it shows that there is a way to act in a violent world, which assumes the ontological priority of non-violence, and this way is called the forgiveness of sins (Ibid).

On the subject of 'the world', 'worldly powers', and how to engage with them, Milbank does not appear to be proposing a 'don't have anything to do with them' approach. Certainly, he does not look favourably on a Church which mimics the world of secular liberalism, panders to it, or allows itself to be coopted by it. On the other hand, one can discern in his writing a certain resignation to the "necessity" of the liberal state, and a "contractual", or legally bound, peace (1990/2006: xv). He even concedes that in some circumstances coercion may be needed to prevent people who are "temporarily blind" from "permanent self-damage". "Such action may not be 'peaceable'," Milbank says, "yet [it] can still be 'redeemed'…and so contribute to the final goal of peace" (1990/2006: 424). There is a similar element of accommodation elsewhere in *Theology and Social Theory* where Milbank seems to say that the Church "must" try to "extend the sphere of socially aesthetic harmony within the state" (1990/2006: 428) and to coax the world and worldly powers to "work towards the ultimate purpose, the true heavenly peace" (1990/2006: 411-412). But, he says, one should not expect too much from the state given that it is committed to the formal goals of *dominium* "by its very nature" (1990/2006: 428-429).

Having completed my review of Cavanaugh, Bell and Milbank, I now turn to try and answer some of the questions I posed at the beginning of the paper. To recap, I firstly want to consider what these three authors say collectively in terms of critique and response to the failings of secular liberalism. As indicated, I am particularly interested in how their ideas relate to my own critique of the liberal project. Next, I will consider whether these authors are able to withstand some of the criticisms which have been levelled at radical orthodoxy more generally, notably in relation to their depiction of the Church and its relationship with the world. Then, I will reflect briefly on whether the ideas of Cavanaugh, Bell and Milbank are useful in the context of the actually operating local church in the inner city before turning to the question of how their ideas are likely to be received in the 'secular' university, particularly in the social sciences. Finally, I will conclude, considering areas for further research.

Criticism and response: what do the ideas of Cavanaugh, Bell and Milbank add up to?

It should be clear that there is considerable overlap between the ideas of Cavanaugh, Bell and Milbank. There may be some differences between them too but apart from a few hints it would require a different piece of work to tease these out. Instead, I want to focus on what they have in common – and more pertinently what I take positively from my reading of them in relation to my critique of the liberal project, which I argue lies at the heart of international development and intervention in the inner cities of the global north.

By way of a point of departure, it is possible to say that Cavanaugh, Bell and Milbank do three things. Firstly, at the level of ontology/epistemology, their writing points us towards the socially constructed nature of much of our reality, including much theological truth, although no less true, real or sacred for this. In this respect, narrative and practice are very important, and our beliefs are not *a prior* to them. Moreover, what we see is that Christian soteriology is simply based on a different *mythos*, or foundational story, from state soteriology but with the Christian, or post-liberal Christian, assertion being that its foundational story and its associated practice is superior. That is, why base your world view on violence as the primary reality when you can base it on peace? What we have, therefore, is a different way of ordering the world, founded on a notion of God, and based on the assertion that we are free when united to each other through God rather than free from each other as individuals.

Secondly, Cavanaugh, Bell and Milbank offer a sustained critique on liberalism/secular liberalism, which in many respects tallies with that found in the social/political sciences. Distinctively, however, they highlight that the problem is fundamentally a theological one, namely the widespread belief that we operate autonomously from God. This, it will be recalled, is the basis of the secular liberal worldview and one which necessitated a replacement *mythos*, namely that we need protecting from our 'primordial' violent state.

Thirdly, Cavanaugh, Bell and Milbank all agree that genuine emancipation will never come from within mainstream politics (reformist or radical), and all three articulate a vision of the Church as the only 'vehicle' truly capable of breaking free of secular liberalism's grip. Moreover, all three agree that any kind of emancipation will need

to be won by a combination of ontological critique (i.e. 'telling a different story') and practice, where ideas become more than just ideas. There is more to say here in terms of whether their thinking – particularly in terms of how they conceive of the Church – is convincing (and liberating) but I will return to this in a moment.

Moving to some specifics, the three authors I have looked at in this paper are helpful in relation to debates in the social/political sciences in two particular respects: firstly their emphasis on the violence of secular liberalism, and how they characterise that violence, goes further than that which I have come across in the social sciences; and secondly they offer some useful reflections on the importance of the *local* level, particularly in relation to its low status in the face of the secular liberal state's subsuming universalism. Both points connect with my own critique of the liberal development project.

Focusing on interventions in both the global north and south, I too have written about a similar violence – the violence of imposition – which goes beyond just physical violence, embodying a tendency to ride roughshod over 'the other', particularly the weaker other. The focus on the violence of secular liberalism connects up with the second point, namely that of the tendency of the secular liberal state to be intolerant of local variation. The importance of taking the local variation seriously, while not losing sight of the underlying structural realities which underpin poverty in distinct areas, is a theme of my own work. Moreover, in an era of so-called globalisation, I would argue that this intolerance has increased: that is, universal 'governance' policies or blue-prints for urban regeneration applied blanket-ly across the world with very little delighting in, or honouring of, the distinctive attributes of local culture, particularly working class culture.

So, to sum up, Bell, Cavanaugh and Milbank are helpful in terms of how they tease out some of the pathologies of secular liberalism in ways which connect with and go further than research in the social/political sciences. But what of their *response* to the pathologies of secular liberalism? To answer this, I turn to their ecclesiology.

Church and world: an idealised and antagonistic ecclesiology?

Radical orthodox theologians have been criticised for loading too much on the Church, for painting it in an idealised light in a way which is divorced from any actually existing church, and for creating an unhelpful gulf between Church and world which is more likely to create enemies than friends and hence fail to advance us towards the peaceable kingdom. But, in light of this paper, is this fair?

There is no doubt that radical orthodoxy is unpopular with lots of people for lots of reasons. This is partly because of its bracing criticism of so many targets: secular liberalism, sociologists, other theologians, and the Church (both liberal and conservative). It is also unpopular because of the very academic style in which it is written. Furthermore, it can come across as intolerant and arrogant in its more strident moments. However, based on my investigations, I would say there is more humility in radical orthodoxy's ecclesiology than first meets the eye, and that its vision of the Church as a 'house of refuge', 'a forgiving place', and a place where 'truly just exchange' occurs is ultimately a beautiful and inclusive one. Moreover, it is a vision not an assertion that this is the way it always is.

Radical orthodoxy and the inner city church?

Do the radical orthodox theologians reviewed here have anything useful to say in relation to the actually operating church in the inner city?

Here, my answer would be a resounding yes not only in terms of its insights in respect of the climate in which the local church operates but also in terms of the vision it sets out for the Church – not humanly possible to realise, no doubt, but a vision which makes sense in a very practical way of what I am doing/trying to do as a priest in the inner city. Here in particular, I would highlight the emphasis on standing apart from the violence, judgement and punishment of the world (with a people who are frequently on the receiving end of this violence, judgement and punishment) while acknowledging that the Church is as in danger of being enslaved to the ways of the world as anyone else, and yet trying at the same time to model an alternative 'contrast' society. While the Church will not get it right all of the time, it does have some powerful resources to draw on – not least an attractive, counter-cultural, story.

In terms of the question of how the local church should relate to the secular liberal powers which it comes in contact with on a daily basis, I am clear from my reading of Cavanaugh, Bell and Milbank that there is room in their ecclesiology for 'building bridges' whilst also being realistic regarding who one is dealing with and striving always to retain one's distinctiveness as the Church. This – for me – rules out seeing the Church as simply another agent of civil society 'acting upon' the state. The Church is never that although sadly it often behaves as if it is. Being clear what it is one is dealing with in secular liberalism, must also make the Church cautious in respect of government overtures, and particularly going after money offered by the state.

The Church as emancipatory political project: airtime in the 'secular' university?

And what about this vision of emancipation in the context of the secular university? What kind of reception can these ideas expect to receive there?

The first thing to recall is Milbank's remark when he wrote *Theology and Social Theory* – over a decade ago now – namely that while much of theology appeared to accept secularisation and the autonomy of secular reason, social theory had reached a place where it found secularisation paradoxical and was facing up to the "inescapability of worship". To this, we could now add the rise of a post-secular current within the academy – meaning different things to different people, of course, and with some less willing to countenance God talk – but nevertheless a current which suggests that the climate is more open in the University for a genuine engagement with theology than one might think if one focuses, say, on the (largely sterile and now widely recognised as sterile) arguments of the likes of Dawkins and the late Hitchens (McLennan 2010)

Moreover, in relation to the social/political science circles I move in, one finds growing frustration and despair with the direction that the liberal project has taken in the so-called era of late capitalism – not least in the University. Moreover, there is little concrete being offered in the way of alternatives: even at this stage, something like the Occupy Movement can be seen to have scarcely made a dent, and is most

likely just a straw in the wind. Thus, within the social/political sciences, there is likely to be an interest in, and sympathy towards, anything which further unpacks the pathologies of liberalism, not least as a clue to how it may be challenged. There is also likely to be sympathy to the idea that the liberal project is most vulnerable at the level of ontology and that this is where the site of struggle should be pitched. Again, the Occupy Movement points to just how difficult it is to get an alternative story heard but radical orthodox political theology is helpful in highlighting that this is – at least in part – what is needed.

But what about the alternative story that radical orthodoxy tells? Here again, I think we are likely to find much sympathy in the social/political sciences with radical orthodoxy's alternative rendering of freedom and its commitment to an ontological priority of peace over violence, and a form of exchange which is just and non-violent (in the broad sense). Moreover, there is likely to be support for any kind of community which genuinely tries to live out the inclusive vision for the Church which radical orthodoxy at its best sets out. At the same time, those 'outside' the Church will – quite rightly – be quick to draw attention to how it thinks the institutional Church operates in practice, and it will also be acutely alert to how the Church often behaves both locally and nationally like just another liberal power. But again this is only right.

What do we do about the fact that it is still difficult to talk about God in the social sciences? We should probably not worry unduly about this: the word is meant to be strange. Moreover, we need to be careful how we advance our views if we are not to engage in the very violence of secular liberalism we have critiqued. As Gergard Lohfink says:

> "[H]ow can anyone change the world and society at its roots without taking away freedom?...There must be a place, visible and tangible, where the salvation of the world can begin…Beginning at that place, the new thing can spread abroad, but not through persuasion, not through indoctrination, not through violence. Everyone must have the opportunity to come and see. All must have the chance to behold and test this new thing…What drives them to

> the new thing cannot be force, not even moral pressure, but only the fascination of a world that is changed" (Lohfink cited in Cavanaugh: 394)

That said, we should continue to gently but persistently point out the illogicality of certain positions which the 'secular' academy formally maintains, and constantly work to chip away at these positions at the level of ideas. As Cavanaugh says, the dominance of state soteriology has made it "perfectly reasonable to drop cluster bombs on 'foreign' villages, and perfectly unreasonable to dispute 'religious' matters in public" (1999: 194). Or, in the terms of this paper, we may add, that it is perfectly acceptable to tell students about a secular vision for political emancipation but not an ecclesial one. Clearly, this is ludicrous! However, it will take time and patience to unseat this position. In the meantime, it is worth remembering that we have plenty of allies in the social and political sciences in the form of people who understand these things and are also committed to a just and genuinely emancipated world like ourselves.

Conclusion: where next?

It is hard to know exactly how to conclude this paper aside from acknowledging that in my quest to stay focused on the 'big picture' I have covered a degree of ground which would probably benefit from a series of papers. While the principal benefit of researching and writing this paper has been to clarify what I find helpful about radical orthodoxy and to connect this more systematically to my work in political science/development, it is worth perhaps now trying to identify the areas where I believe further work is needed. In the first instance, there is scope for a more in-depth interrogation of someone like Milbank's ecclesiology and also his discussion of secular liberalism's violence. What are the strengths, weaknesses, and possible inconsistencies in his position in relation to these two areas? In addition, there is scope for further investigation of radical orthodoxy's analysis of 'the local' and particularly how it articulates the relationship between the local and the universal in respect of the Eucharist. Furthermore, and perhaps most interesting for me, is to think further about how Milbank's ecclesiology – his high claims and aspirations for the Church – sits with the inevitably much more messy, fallen, and dilemma-filled reality of trying to be that 'contrast society' out in the world. Would we want to

construct a different ecclesiology in light of this reality or does radical orthodoxy – if we study it carefully, capturing a sense of its broad sweep, and not quoting it out of context – say it all? To take this further, what is needed – no doubt amongst other things – is an ethnography of the church at the local level pursued honestly, openly and without self-censorship.

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