RADICAL ORTHODOXY

David Grumett

University of Exeter

Abstract

The newest theological direction to be covered in this series, Radical Orthodoxy was launched in 1999 by Cambridge theologians John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward. It sought to contest secular culture and the sidelining of theology from academic and public discourse by demonstrating the insufficiency of any account of reality that sought to exclude religion or theology. Key themes have included culture, participation, gift, liturgy, erotic desire and the body.

Keywords: gift; Milbank, John; participation; Pickstock, Catherine; Ward, Graham

In 1999, a collection of essays was published titled *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*. Identifying the volume as ‘very much a Cambridge collection’, the editors expressed a desire to redress dominant secularist theory and the associated discrediting or privatizing of theology, and to oppose a ‘materialism which is soulless, aggressive, nonchalant and nihilistic’.[[1]](#footnote-1) They wished to ‘reclaim the world by situating its concerns and activities within a theological framework’ by recolonizing ‘sites in which secularism has invested heavily’ such as aesthetics, politics, sex and the body.

Before the 1999 launch of Radical Orthodoxy, John Milbank had published *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* and *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture*. These works established his credentials as a high-power critic of the secular historiography and philosophy ubiquitous in the modern university. That his intellectual project was from the start controversial and paradigm-shifting, taking time to find acceptance, is suggested by Milbank’s non-standard academic career path. He read modern history at Oxford, gaining third class honours, then was awarded a postgraduate certificate in theology following studies at Westcott House, Cambridge. He completed a doctorate at Birmingham with philosopher Leon Pompa on the Italian humanist, rhetorician and philosophical historian Giambattista Vico. This overlapped with lecturing at Lancaster funded by the Christendom Trust, a charity founded by Anglo-Catholic socialist and philanthropist Maurice Reckitt. Milbank was later created (honorary) Doctor of Divinity by the University of Cambridge, where he held a readership, before moving to Virginia. He is now Professor of Religion, Politics and Ethics at Nottingham.

One of several ways into Milbank’s thought is via understanding his great admiration for French Jesuit Henri de Lubac and his *surnaturel* thesis. Inspired by this doctrine, Milbank contests the dualistic construction of nature and grace that developed in neo-Thomist theology. Rather than nature existing in a pure state independently of divine grace and action—which are granted only to a distinct ecclesial and ‘spiritual’ realm—de Lubac sees the whole of nature as dependent on divine action, which suffuses and sustains it. This dependence is founded on a primordial relation between God and nature established at creation, which founds a ‘natural desire’ for God in creation. Milbank concludes his study of de Lubac by noting the wide implications of this vision for theology today, which

needs to recover the authentic and more radical account of the natural desire for the supernatural as offered by de Lubac…. This account is articulated in terms of spirit always oriented to grace, gift without contrast, the cosmos as lured by grace through humanity, unilateral exchange, and the link of grace with art.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Milbank thus draws from de Lubac the idea of gift—a donation far exceeding notions of entitlement by the recipient or obligation by the giver.[[3]](#footnote-3) The true gift is without contrast either to giver or recipient, proceeding from giver to recipient such that the recipient also becomes a giver of unobligated gratitude in a circulating economy of gift and grace.

In *Being Reconciled*, Milbank offers a series of reflections on classic theological topics inspired by this idea. Opening with evil, he argues that it can only be understood as a privation of goodness. As Augustine shows, the free will needed to act well depends on the gift of grace, and is very different from Kant’s view of freedom as absolute autonomy, which in modern liberal society is the root of tremendous evil. In particular, spectating on violence without stepping in to prevent it is ‘actually *more violent* than participating in violence’.[[4]](#footnote-4) To gaze on violence unmoved objectifies a fellow human, whereas one’s own violence might flow from real belief and so be ultimately a force for good.

Forgiveness reveals that closely bound up with the idea of gift is that of exchange. Obtaining forgiveness for past acts is, however, frequently impossible: annihilated victims are unable to forgive, a sovereign power cannot forgive on their behalf, and memories fade. Forgiveness can only be found in a wider context of ‘unlimited positive circulation’ through participation in eschatological finality.[[5]](#footnote-5) Ultimately, the source of all true forgiveness is Christ as sovereign victim, with the importance of the incarnation being that it makes possible this forgiveness. The crucifixion confirms this exceptional status of Christ, who on Milbank’s reading of the Gospel narratives was condemned by neither the Jewish nor the Roman authorities but was nevertheless killed.

In the chapter on ecclesiology, Milbank develops his analysis of participation, embracing its classic understanding as a hierarchical principle of order that assigns all beings their place in a divinely-governed cosmos. This introduces a complementary principle of the relatedness of all distinct beings in and through God, which is realised fully in the Church’s Trinitarian life. But how can the Church function as an ethical community? Through grace, which is understood in terms of ‘moral luck’. Happiness is subject to many vagaries, and the consequences of even well-intended actions are unpredictable: there is no simple correspondence between acting well and flourishing. The ethical, this suggests, is a true gift-exchange, which is as such asymmetrical and non-identically repeated. Milbank pleads that this socialist ethos be permitted to permeate capitalist society, with exchange reconstrued ‘according to the protocols of a universal gift-exchange’ founded on vocation and profession.[[6]](#footnote-6) He views exchange, finally, as folded into a ‘culture of affinity’. In postmodernity, traditional social boundaries are obliterated, and likewise Christianity, Milbank, contends, is the ‘religion of the obliteration of boundaries’.[[7]](#footnote-7) Yet whereas the response of secular politics is ‘formal, arbitrary and oppressive control of the flux by a sovereign empire’, Christianity offers bodily reconciliation.

In a reply to critics in *The* *Future of Love*, Milbank defends his historiography of Christian polity against the charge that it is idealised. He discusses the truly remarkable nature of Christian hospitals, almshouses, orphanages and schools, which arose not simply in response to social need but because, for the first time in history, that need was recognized within a particular religious framework. Moreover, charity was not merely an *ad hoc* alleviation of need, but the ‘forging or restoring of bonds of mutuality between donor and recipient’, which included festive and ritual dimensions.[[8]](#footnote-8) This vision of Christian *caritas* is threatened by modern liberalism, in which individual freedom trumps personal relationality, although can still erupt to transform and redeem relationships distorted by capitalism.[[9]](#footnote-9)

This discussion of Milbank’s work opened with de Lubac. In his recent debate with Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, Milbank returns to themes from de Lubac but with significant iteration. His long response opens with extensive discussion of Hegel, accepting Žižek’s counterintuitive assessment that Hegelian philosophy of history ‘indicates not the logical inevitability of the course of human history, but rather the dependency of even our most abstract, universal assumptions on past contingent events’.[[10]](#footnote-10) In this account, the emerging, personal subject who makes history is its true agent. But against Žižek’s dialectical, atheist—and, we might add, superfluously vulgar—Christianity, Milbank proposes a ‘Catholic metaphysics’ grounded in incarnational paradox, which is a mediation grounding the immediacy of human experience. The paradoxical character of everyday experience (ghosts, magic, fairies, miracles, sex, midnight…) felt by many ordinary people should not, he convincingly argues, be accounted for by invoking discrete supernatural intervention, which is almost as bad as disbelieving it altogether. Rather, such experiences point to the real, bizarre character of the everyday world.[[11]](#footnote-11) It is in this contingency that its true depth and beauty inhere.

By means of paradox, Milbank thus rescues everyday experience from deconstruction and dissolution and recovers a sense of its enchanted character by enfolding the whole in a divine–human economy of emanation and return. De Lubac’s voice once again becomes clear:

Creatures are given to be in order to return to God, in order to return to God through gratitude. Herein lies the greater glory. And if the paradoxical double glory of God is that creatures are also glorified, also justified, then the paradoxical double glory of the creation is that it is not only glorious in its own beauty, but all the more glorious as glorifying its maker.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The paradoxical nature of creation is thus a corollary of its excessive giftedness, with what need not be constantly outweighing and proving ‘more essential and necessary than what must be’.[[13]](#footnote-13)

It is striking that it has taken somebody whose primary scholarly background is not theology (at least, as classically conceived) to catalyze and crystallize ideas so widely disseminated as those of Radical Orthodoxy. We shall return to Milbank later when considering Radical Orthodoxy’s possible future directions.

Graham Ward is Professor of Contextual Theology and Ethics at the University of Manchester. He read English and French as an undergraduate at Cambridge, before teaching in the University’s English faculty. He then completed undergraduate and doctoral degrees in Theology, and ministerial formation at Westcott House. Ward met Milbank at a literature and theology conference, but in contrast with Milbank, Ward is an Anglican priest and has performed a series of pastoral roles in conjunction with his academic work: a curacy at St Mary Redcliffe, Bristol, before becoming Chaplain of Exeter College, Oxford then Dean of Peterhouse, Cambridge. Perhaps in consequence, there shines through much of his work a deep connexion with contemporary culture and its ambiguities.

With a background in postmodern philosophy and critical theory, Ward’s major programmatic work was *Cities of God*. Raised in Manchester and now returned there, he is well-attuned to high-octane cityscapes. But his title, by playfully pluralising Augustine, also highlights a key feature of the Bishop of Hippo’s own work: that the city of God and the earthly city are, in reality, intermixed. Just as the city of God can no more be identified exclusively with the institutional church, so the earthly city cannot any longer be written off as entirely corrupt and sinful. There is love of God in the world just as there is ample self-love in the church.

Vital to Ward’s contextual theology is a reading of the ‘signs of the times’. He writes:

To ask what time it is is to work with social and critical theorists, grasping and evaluating their methods, assumptions, conclusions and observations about living in various parts of the globe today. To ask what time it is requires taking cultural studies seriously.[[14]](#footnote-14)

What ‘culture’ means here will become clearer in due course. But the first key points to grasp concern its relation to theological knowledge and meaning. Central to Ward’s project is an analogical view of theology and the world in which all knowledge, including knowledge about God, is mediated through culture. All cultural forms contain elements of Christian truth. This is a world of metaphor and sign in which cool, rational objectivity is an illusion—not because truth as such does not exist, but because meaning exceeds human interpretive powers. There is too much truth in the world to be made full sense of.

This view of the reality of theological truth grounds Ward’s accounts of how a modern apologetics must proceed. Christian responses can no longer be judged, he argues, on criteria of truth and authenticity. Rather, what must be assessed is their believability, acceptability and adequacy ‘with respect to the situation we inhabit’.[[15]](#footnote-15) Theology’s persuasive power moves centre-stage.

So much for the cultural reality in which Christian social critique is launched. But what of the content of that critique? Ward outlines several elements, including the need to counter advanced social atomism with a strong doctrine of participation and a comprehensive account of embodiment. These objectives are not, in practice, separable. Ward envisions a ‘transcorporeality in which the body of Christ is mapped onto and shot like a watermark through the physical bodies, social bodies, institutional bodies, ecclesial bodies’.[[16]](#footnote-16) People with physical bodies comprise the church, which is the body of Christ in which that body is received eucharistically, and those people live out their Christian lives through participating in innumerable other bodies—communal, social, employment—as well as through families and relationships.

The other main role of Christian social criticism should be, Ward argues, to undo the denigration in both society and church of erotic love, resisting postmodern seduction with Christian desire. He protests: ‘The communities of desire, dreamt and engineered by modernity, are parodies of the Christian *ecclesia*.’[[17]](#footnote-17) In the liberal capitalist state, desire does not construct lasting bonds between people but isolates them as each pursues private pleasures and aspirations. Within the church, moreover, love is denigrated by the false separation of *eros* and *agape*, with church life based too often on dispassionate, selfless pursuit of duty rather than on passionate desire for fully embodied self-giving and self-opening. Furthermore, church institutions arbitrarily privilege some forms of erotic life over others—hence Ward founds his erotics in the bodily dynamics of eucharist rather than the legal-contractual marriage service. He is deeply committed to a far more open embrace of sexuality in all its multiple forms than most churches are currently willing to risk.

Ward’s use of the city as archetypal image of flux, encounter, aesthetics and alienation could be seen as superseded by increasingly dislocated postmodern living: in the internet age, it matters less where people live, and personal encounters are increasingly replaced by automated, remote processes. But Ward regards cyberspace as continuing and intensifying the disembodied, dispossessed ‘life’ of the city. Its eroticism is highly charged, with possible interactions at once both limitless across geographical boundaries, generations and ethnicities, and digitised, atomised and superficial. Reasons for Christian hope nevertheless abide. In a world of information flows and open bodies, the ‘sites of Christian community cannot be mapped or labelled’, and all can ‘find their place in the continually expansive Christological corpus’.[[18]](#footnote-18) As Ward’s case studies reveal, forms of Christian life are frequently found in the most unlikely places.

Ward develops his Christology further in *Christ and Culture*. Rather than defining Christ’s essential person or teaching, Ward bases his enquiry on a consideration of *where* Christ is.[[19]](#footnote-19) Drawing on themes from his cultural analysis such as transcorporeality and the brokenness of the body, he shows how eschatology is crucial to understanding God’s relationship with the world in Christ. Completion and satisfaction are postponed, impelling a yearning desire revealed in the shattered, displaced body of Christ himself. Ward espouses a Markan Christ, replete with painful paradox and living in physical, intimate, even erotic relation with the people around him. Christ’s blood is first shed not on the cross but at his circumcision, which marks an ongoing, kenotic, relation with his people as he shows himself to them and begins to redeem them.

The *Cities of God* cultural methodology is deployed in *True Religion*. Ward here engages a rich montage of film, drama, literature and art, much of it postmodern, to advance his project of theological retrieval through culture. The iconoclastic nature of that project, and the mix of analogy and parody it employs, become more clearly apparent. He avers:

Religion does not live in and of itself any more—it lives in commercial business, gothic and sci-fi fantasy, in health clubs, themed bars and architectural design, among happy-hour drinkers, tattooists, ecologists and cyberpunks. Religion has become a special effect, inseparably bound to an entertainment value.[[20]](#footnote-20)

This analysis, intentionally provocative, could easily be seen as a sell-out to secularism. Yet Ward’s assessment emerges from his conviction that secularism, modernity and liberalism are disintegrating. Yet the *saeculum* classically had no existence separate from religion. Theologians can gather together the shards of Christian witness scattered across secular society, and religion has the capacity to ‘redeem the spiritual materialisms of virtual reality’ and the ‘omnivorous rule of global capitalism’.[[21]](#footnote-21)

In *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, which can be seen as the sequel to *Cities of God*, Ward explores in more theoretical vein the dynamics of how religion may change society. His reasons for taking culture rather than society as his theological locus also become clearer. The notion of ‘the social’ is too deeply implicated in the systems of measurement and categorization characteristic of modernity to be neutrally available for theological purposes, especially in the postmodern context.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Ward defends the view that theologians always have to negotiate a place with respect to other cultural discourses, acting as mediators rather than deliverers of authoritative verdicts. Provocatively, he demonstrates how this is true even of a figure of the stature of Karl Barth, who has been an abiding and often positive figure in Ward’s thought. Barth’s theology developed following the sudden death of his father in his childhood and against the domestic backdrop of his *ménage à trois*. Barth was a flawed, vulnerable figure, trained as a pastor not a theologian, who would have refuted the urbane liberal theology of Harnack and other teachers, Ward argues, even if the First World War had not occurred.[[23]](#footnote-23) Barth exploited networks and patronage for self-promotion, with his life subsequently edited by the Barth industry, his ‘symbolic bankers’, to conform with his very different imagined, idealised persona. This is not, of course, ultimately a criticism of Barth. All processes by which belief, including theological belief, is produced and reproduced are like this. Ward’s analysis does, however, helpfully dismantle the notion that Barth’s thought is in any way objectively normative for theologians.

The dynamics of cultural change are then examined. Key to Ward’s analysis is ‘standpoint epistemology’, which under the influence of feminist epistemology posits Christianity and all other knowledge communities as limited and finite. Importantly, standpoints are asymmetric, exhibiting unstable interrelations of marginalisation and domination. There is no objective ‘view from nowhere’; rather, objectivity is the ‘naming of a direction’.[[24]](#footnote-24) Standpoints are therefore intentional and, in the Christian case, eschatological, never able to attain completion this side of the eschaton.

Ward concludes with an extended plea for the rehabilitation of imagination, drawing on Cornelius Castoriadis. Imagination, rooted in desire, enables the fashioning of different social possibilities. This is not private introspection but takes place within economies of response, relation and desire. Personal imagination plumbs a cultural imaginary, in which the symbolic is inchoately present in a similar way to the unconscious in the Freudian ego. Imagination is nevertheless predicated on the Christian ‘scandal of particularity’, in which action and dreaming are not mere functions of social or biological process but generated within a personal subject.

Despite its bold agenda, Ward’s work has attracted less controversy than that of his colleagues. This is perhaps because, although intellectually demanding, Ward employs a more traditional academic style of prose, argument and referencing. To overlook Ward’s contribution, however, would be a great mistake. He provides a way into Radical Orthodoxy for people from non-theological disciplines and for those within theology more sceptical about the Church. Notably, in Steven Shakespeare’s critical exposition of Radical Orthodoxy, Ward’s work fares considerably better than that of colleagues.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Catherine Pickstock has spent her entire academic career in Cambridge, beginning with undergraduate studies in English and theology. She is currently Reader in Philosophy and Theology. Her controversial thesis was published in 1997 as *After Writing*, and is to date her one major monograph. In her words, it ‘falls within the new theological imperative of Radical Orthodoxy’.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Language, Pickstock argues, is revealed most fully not in writing but by speech. This preference for orality, which is physically performed language, above the written text, derives from a sophisticated reading of Plato against Derrida’s presentation of him. It is also intimately conjoined with desire. Beyond rational contemplation, a higher good awaits the philosopher: erotic possession and ‘purification by means of captivation and penetration from without’.[[27]](#footnote-27) This ascent of the soul culminates in worship (understood as praise or doxology) which, imitating the good, ontologically constitutes both the city and the person who gives praise.

Alongside this critique of textualization, Pickstock pursues the critique of ‘spatialization’ launched by Foucault and de Certeau, in which ‘time is neutralized, and all is ordered and surveyable without remainder, within absolute borders’ and the individual ‘internally mapped like a spatialized city’.[[28]](#footnote-28) The modern city thus becomes a necropolis, deprived of the life and reality previously given it in the era when daily life was ordered eucharistically. The principal theorist of this rupture is Duns Scotus, who saw the miraculous as residing not ‘in the analogical resemblances of the physical order, but in the possible radical discontinuities of that order’.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Pickstock suggests perceptively that the reason the liturgical reforms that followed the Second Vatican Council were problematic was their failure to take into account the cultural dimension of the eucharist. She offers a suggestive reading of the multiple analogies, metaphors and paradoxes inherent in the eucharist: for example, in liturgical space, physical journeying towards the altar is balanced by a divine movement of the host into our own physical bodies.[[30]](#footnote-30) Her argument is based largely on analysis of excerpts from the Latin mass text, and she insists that the eucharist ‘situates us more inside language than ever’.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Several of these themes are pursued in *Truth in Aquinas*, co-written with Milbank. The authors here argue for the centrality of the category of divine substance in Aquinas’s ‘theoontology’, which intimately fuses metaphysics and sacred teaching. Fundamental to the reading here developed is the notion that transcendentals are fully present in their instantiations, and convertible into those instantiations.[[32]](#footnote-32) Metaphysics thereby becomes material and historical—in images, narratives, scripture and liturgy—because its general categories can be defined only via empirical description of particulars. Sensation becomes both an experience of mediation and its reality. This ‘extraordinary elevation of human sensory intuition’ particularly exalts touch (not vision, as usually supposed) above the other senses, on the grounds that touch requires no medium except the body of the toucher.[[33]](#footnote-33) Yet all sensory operations can be regarded as touch, and taste—through which God is encountered in the eucharist—is identified as the supreme form of touching. This ontology establishes a spirituality of desire, in which the eucharist is ‘only present in a kind of dispersal back into ... historical processes and then every physical thing’, avoiding the fetishization of either presence or absence.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Pickstock’s work has been widely read and discussed, not without contention, and she was without doubt a key founding member of Radical Orthodoxy. In her work to date, she appears highly committed to semiotic, linguistic analysis and to illumining Christian tradition with Platonic imagery. The relative paucity of recent work makes it harder to assess her distinctive, ongoing contribution. Nevertheless, as Radical Orthodoxy grows and new book series are launched, it is diversifying, and some of the approaches and positions she adopts and for which she is best known—such as non-identical repetition and anti-Scotism—are being complemented with others.

What then might the future hold for Radical Orthodoxy? In an important recent chapter, Milbank proposes some trajectories. This piece is noteworthy for its irenic and even, in places, self-critical tone. In the space here available, three interlinked points may be noted. In developing them, Milbank draws partly on my own work.[[35]](#footnote-35)

First, he urges a fuller espousal of metaphysical realism, acknowledging ‘some truth’ to criticisms that Radical Orthodoxy was originally over-dependent for its grounding on postmodern philosophy.[[36]](#footnote-36) This point is echoed elsewhere by Ward, who avers:

The favoured language of postmodernity … and the move towards soft understandings of the subject as agent and of power as diffuse are at best not going to be effective resistors to laissez-faire capitalism and at worst help foster a culture in which such capitalism can have its greatest impact.[[37]](#footnote-37)

For Milbank, key figures of inspiration in addressing this deficit include Maurice Blondel, for whom the bond of substance ‘manifests and realises ever-again the hypostatic unity of God and humanity which alone finally guarantees and secures the finite ontological order’, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who offers an ‘evolutionary sense of the dynamism within nature’.[[38]](#footnote-38) This can be read as an extension of the metaphysics of participation: if we see the different parts of the world as linked together in what Aquinas presents as a ‘texture of causes’, it seems clear that evolution cannot be regarded as merely random. Like all processes in the world it is related to formal and final causes, which give it purpose and direction.

Second, and following from the first point, Milbank distances himself with simplistic interpretations of post-Scotist metaphysics as entirely corrupt. He admits that ‘more needs to be said about the adequacy or otherwise of the Radical Orthodoxy genealogy’.[[39]](#footnote-39) Part of the point at issue concerns the scope of narrative: Milbank is a bold constructor of grand narratives, albeit in rhetorical mode, in contrast with Ward’s reading of intellectual history as ambiguous and fractured. At the very least, the radically orthodox voice needs to be more explicit about the different textual hermeneutics in use. For example, Ward wisely warns his readers that Augustine is present ‘holographically’ in *Cities of God* in a fashion that ‘bears some relation to the late-fourth- and early-fifth-century Bishop of Hippo’ but does not purport to be a ‘true interpretation’.[[40]](#footnote-40) Others often fail to provide such caveats, however, leaving hostages to fortune and, at worst, cloaking simplistic interpretation under the overworn postmodern mantle of textual instability.

Third, Milbank reflects on how best to understand the principle of mediation that is key to an analogical understanding of being. An alternative to ‘non-identical repetition’ is, he suggests, habit. This he attributes not simply—nor even perhaps, primarily—to humans, but to the world as a whole, making possible a ‘nuanced version of panpsychic vitalism in which a self-organising power operates with different degrees of intensity at every level of physical reality from the inorganic to the consciously rational’.[[41]](#footnote-41) This ‘assists the re-thinking of metaphysical realism in an era aware of temporality, evolution and historicity’.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Milbank thus addresses several key growth areas for Radical Orthodoxy. In combination, his proposals satisfy many of the areas of concern that I myself have had about Radical Orthodoxy: its sometimes simplistic historiography; neglect or disdain of materiality, bound up with a sometimes confused concept of participation as a principle not of hierarchic metaphysical order (as in Neoplatonism) but of random postmodern mutuality and flux; and an unwillingness to engage seriously with key objective aspects of the current worldview that do not fit easily within the anti-scientific narrative of postmodernity, such as evolution. If colleagues and acolytes are willing and able to accept these waymarks in their own work, then Radical Orthodoxy has real potential to continue to develop along lines that are intellectually credible and that speak to the realities of current life.

Nevertheless, Radical Orthodoxy would benefit from giving closer attention to the concrete material practices that have shaped Christian sensibility, such as food and eating, and to the history of those practices. There is a need to move beyond critical theory to undertake works of detailed historical recovery—indeed, this would seem to be a corollary of the attempts by both Pickstock and Milbank to deconstruct the metaphysics of ‘the present’. Take, for instance, a recent study of food published in the ‘Illuminations’ series, which offers sophisticated theoretical reflections on the relationships between food, the body, culture and society by treating food primarily as a semiotic system. For example, in the Mexican *molli* dish, the mixing of chilli and chocolate is presented as a metaphor for the blending of divine desire and human desire in Christian life.[[43]](#footnote-43) Moreover, taste contributes to an ‘eros of cogniton’ that combines knowing (*saber*) and savouring (*sabor*) and ultimately transmutes into the gastroeroticism of eucharistic desire.[[44]](#footnote-44) What this study lacks, however, is any acknowledgement or reappropriation of the wealth of Christian dietary practice on which present-day Christians might draw, ignoring even the historic dietary disciplines of the author’s own religious order, the Dominicans. A historical narrative of food in Christian tradition would, in contrast, be likely to cover its roots in scripture, hermitic asceticism and monastic moderation, mendicant dietary poverty and flexibility, the seasonal calendar of feasts and fasts, civic regulation of fasts, the Reformers’ recasting of fasting as a personal choice, and the role of Christians in giving birth to modern vegetarianism.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Almost finally, a word on scripture. Radical Orthodoxy has repeatedly been charged with episodic engagement with this key source of Christian theology. There are some exceptions, especially Ward’s *Christ and Culture* and a few select essays by Milbank.[[46]](#footnote-46) But it is true that Radical Orthodoxy is founded more on critical and linguistic philosophy than on Christian scripture. At the very least, scripture is read through particular interpretive lenses in order to promote predefined projects, rather than scriptural reading being an enterprise pursued for its own sake. This seems strange, given Radical Orthodoxy’s repeated and entirely valid protests that much theology of recent decades has sold out to secular concepts and methodologies. But it could equally be argued that Radical Orthodoxy’s partiality in using scripture is a fact of *all* scriptural reading, and that by laying out its hermeneutics more explicitly than many other interpreters, it is using scripture more honestly than at least some critics. Moreover, scripture is inseparable from wider Christian tradition, which has bequeathed to modern secular culture an array of practices and histories ripe for reinscription within a Christian narrative informed by scripture. Ward’s work especially reminds us of the huge potential provided by material culture for engagement by theologians and biblical scholars working in partnership.

Readers wishing to enter further into Radical Orthodoxy could do a lot worse than obtain one of three recent, accessible volumes previously cited: Ward’s *Politics of Discipleship*, Milbank’s *Future of Love*, or the *Reader*. Ward’s most recent work can be seen as completing the triptych begun with *Cities of God* and *Cultural Transformation*, speaking from where the theologian must now stand. Milbank’s collection, though spanning a wider period, is similarly engaged. Moreover, three collections of encounters between Radical Orthodoxy and different Christian denominations provide an alternative way in.[[47]](#footnote-47) But a risk of these latter approaches is that they encourage a view of Radical Orthodoxy as a single, homogenous movement. In this introductory article, although I have identified overarching features and developments, I have also highlighted the diversity of Radical Orthodoxy even among its best-known representatives. To leave maximum space for this task, I have skated over a whole series of complex and contestable concepts and excurses, as anyone who picks up *Being Reconciled* or *After Writing* will quickly discover. This is because, notwithstanding faults identified by various critics, Radical Orthodoxy remains an important new theological sensibility and phenomenon—indeed, the only new direction taken since the 1960s deemed worth covering in this series. Its interpretive power needs to be grasped alongside possible weaknesses. Radical Orthodoxy can be embraced or rejected, but not ignored.

Further Reading

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Items marked \* provide an accessible introduction.

1. *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, eds John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 108; see my review in *New Blackfriars* 87 (2006), 198–9. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See further David Grumett, *Henri de Lubac: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 15–16. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), 28; also idem, *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (London: SCM, 2009), 223–41, on the aftermath of the events of 11 September 2001, and 352–63 on the gift. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 48, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Milbank, *Future*, 197–220. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Milbank, *Future*, 242–63. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. John Milbank, ‘The double glory, or paradox versus dialectics: on not quite agreeing with Slavoj Žižek’, in Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2009), 110–233 (114). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Milbank, ‘Double glory’, 176–7. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Milbank, ‘Double glory’, 201–2. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Milbank, ‘Double glory’, 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000), 3. I am very grateful to Graham for conversation about this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ward *Cities*, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ward, *Cities*, 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ward, *Cities*, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ward, *Cities*, 247, 257. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture* (London: Blackwell, 2005), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Graham Ward, *True Religion* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 132–3. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ward, *True Religion*, 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Graham Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 15–57. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ward, *Cultural Transformation*, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Steven Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction* (London: SPCK, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), xii. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Pickstock, *After Writing*, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Pickstock, *After Writing*, 60–1. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Pickstock, *After Writing*, 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Pickstock, *After Writing*, 228–33. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Pickstock, *After Writing*, 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2001), 39–43. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth*, 60–87. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth*, 105–11. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. David Grumett, ‘Blondel, Modern Catholic Theology and the Leibnizian Eucharistic Bond’, *Modern Theology* 23 (2007), 561–77. See also idem, *Teilhard de Chardin: Theology, Humanity and Cosmos* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 197–235. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. John Milbank, ‘The grandeur of reason and the perversity of rationalism: Radical Orthodoxy’s first decade’, in *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, eds John Milbank and Simon Oliver (London: Routledge, 2009), 367–404 (391–2). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens* (London: SCM, 2009), 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Milbank, ‘Grandeur’, 391–2. Milbank speculates that de Lubac was ‘at least indirectly’ indebted to this French spiritual realism coming from Maine de Biran. We can go further than that, however: correspondence and papers in Georges Chantraine, *Henri de Lubac: les années de formation (1919–29)* (Paris: Cerf, 2009) prove this. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Milbank, ‘Grandeur’, 379. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ward, *Cities*, 24, 262 n18. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Milbank, ‘Grandeur’, 377. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Milbank, ‘Grandeur’, 391; also comments on the need ‘further to incorporate temporality into metaphysics’ in idem, *Future*, 329–34. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Angel F. Méndez Montoya, *The Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009), 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Montoya, *Theology*, 45–76. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. David Grumett and Rachel Muers, *Theology on the Menu: Asceticism, Meat and Christian Diet* (London: Routledge, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 61–93. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. *Encounter between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy: Transfiguring the World through the Word*, eds Adrian Pabst and Christoph Schneider (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant, and Participation*, eds James K.A. Smith and James H. Olthuis (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005); *Radical Orthodoxy? A Catholic Enquiry*, ed. Laurence Paul Hemming (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)