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OPERATION NEPTUNE SPEAR

In my previously published review essay of this book for *Expositions*, entitled “The Monstrosity of Protestantism,”¹ I made the argument that John Milbank’s counter-narrative trope of constructing an alternative history to modernity has effectively pigeonholed the school of Radical Orthodox theology to the task of undoing the Protestant Reformation. Further, with the fast and loose way that Milbank plays with history, it is as if we might pretend that the social, cultural, political, and religious torment that was the Reformation never happened at all, and by extension, the Christian church might once again revel in the glory of Christendom.

Beyond the concern over defending the positive value of Protestantism, my real point of contention belongs on the theo-political terrain. To put it in schematic form: (1) Milbank’s disavowal and unrelenting denigration of Protestantism is achieved by way of, and is part and parcel with, his denial of history; (2) Milbank’s denial of history betrays a lingering Christian triumphalism wherein an “ecclesiastically shaped, even though now more lay-directed” (115) world of sacred harmony still nevertheless operates according to the principles of a church monopoly; (3) no matter how much Milbank tries to temper the excesses of past church monopolies (e.g., Milbank is even so bold to defend a paternalism so long as it is sufficiently modified “with a greater humility and attentiveness to populist feedback” (127)) by imaginatively reconstructing an alternative history ripe with alternative possibilities for a better future, this is no more than a theological flight of fancy; (4) wishing it so does not make it so; (5) and finally, even more, it is this wish itself that harbors within it a history of sacred violence that itself must be reckoned with and put to rest.

The one element I would like to add to this multi-faceted bone of contention here now is a seditious one. While I affirm without condition Creston Davis’

¹See Jeffrey W. Robbins, “The Monstrosity of Protestantism,” in *Expositions*, Vol. 4, nos. 1&2 (2010): 89-94.

articulation of the “revolutionary political problematic” shared by Milbank and Slavoj Žižek, and agree that the question this raises is “How can the theological and material unite to fund resistance to capitalist nihilism” (4), following the technical definition offered by William James from “The Will to Believe,” I am not persuaded that the choice between Milbank or Žižek leaves us with a “genuine option.” This is the point made by Clayton Crockett in his opening paragraph when he writes, “We cannot (even if we desperately want to) simply choose Sunday over Saturday, paradox over dialectics, or even vice versa.” It is also the main critique offered up by John Caputo in his review of this book. As Caputo asks, “What exactly is the compelling need we are under to agree with either one of these positions or to choose between them? Why do we have to love either one of these monsters? . . . Why inscribe either absolute contradiction or absolute peace at the heart of things instead of ambience and ambiguity?”²

This is not to say that Milbank and Žižek do not present us with a choice. Indeed, Davis rightly frames the debate that exists between at least these two particular figures as a debate over paradox or dialectics offering up two differing Christological interpretations which give way to two opposing versions of materialism: the one a theological materialism wherein the material world is seen as God’s good creation anchored in the transcendent glory of God, and the other a (atheistic) materialist materialism of radical contingency and total freedom. With this in mind, what follows should not be misconstrued as a criticism of the book per se. The book works by the terms it sets for itself. Even more, the book works to illuminate and advance aspects of both Milbank and Žižek’s thinking. The stakes and urgency of their projects are given clear articulation. What I do mean to suggest, however—where my sedition comes in—is my growing sense that the time has come to lay down our arms against Milbank, and the school of Radical Orthodoxy he has come to represent. Not because his belligerence has become any more palpable, but because his time has passed.

Consider what has by now become common wisdom after the death of Osama bin Laden. When the nearly decade-long manhunt for Osama bin Laden came to a conclusion with the Navy SEAL raid dubbed “Operation Neptune Spear,” bin Laden had already been swept to the sidelines of world events by the democratic uprisings that had ruptured the accepted order of the Arab world. First in Tunisia and then quickly thereafter in Egypt, the people’s power had been shown in force. Leaderless, nonviolent, non-ideological even, these protests in Tunisia and Egypt delivered more to their people in a short span with the toppling of two hardened and ensconced dictatorial regimes in two successive months than al-Qaeda or its affiliates ever did, or ever could. Put in theoretical terms, as Jacques Derrida explained in his dialogue with Giovanna Borradori in the immediate aftermath of 9/11: what made the “bin Laden effect” so unacceptable, beyond even its “cruelty, [its] disregard for human life, [its] disrespect for law, for women, [its] use of what is worst in techno-capitalist modernity for the purpose of religious fanaticism,” was that its actions “*open onto*

²See John D. Caputo, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (2009): <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=17605>.

no future and, in my view, have no future."³ So even as bin Laden's execution was celebrated on the streets of New York City, his death had long since been assured by the stillborn revolution he wrought.

Even in the war of imagery bin Laden so successfully fought against the U.S., with his death there was the doubling down on his ignominy with the dissemination of the image of him with remote control in hand watching the carefully crafted image of himself on television, or the several outtakes of bin Laden with different shades of black dye in his beard delivering ominous messages of warning to the West. Which shades of black or gray look just right to project the appropriate image of austerity and vigor for a man holed up in a compound valued at three million dollars hidden in the light of day in the military town of Abbottabad only a stone's throw from Pakistan's top military academy? Or what was even worse, when bin Laden's final recorded message was finally released a couple of weeks after his death, as the purported leader of the radical edge of Islam, he himself was playing catch-up to the revolutionary events of the so-called Arab Spring, brandishing his credentials on the backs of the very people's movements that had rejected his promised means of deliverance—a voice from a dead man who even while he still had been alive had become the agent of his own irrelevance.

It is a stretch perhaps, but an instructive one I believe, to compare the "bin Laden effect" with what might be termed the Milbank effect. Milbank was introduced to a broad American academic audience in a high profile article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* written by Jeff Sharlet in June 2000. Introduced as the "earthly creator of Radical Orthodoxy," it was here in this article where it was speculated that Milbank's movement "may well become the biggest development in theology since Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door."⁴ It was a year later that *Time Magazine* declared Milbank *a bona fide* "academic star" and identified him as one of its seven innovative thinkers for the new millennium, crediting him especially with clearing "a way for theologians to reclaim their place at the academic table, ending decades, if not centuries, of marginalization."⁵

This, at least, was the promise offered up by Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy. It was announced most clearly by Milbank himself in the introduction to his breakout book, *Theology and Social Theory*, wherein Milbank defines the book's purpose as showing how Christian theology, properly understood, accomplishes

³Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 113. Italics from the original.

⁴Jeff Sharlet, "Theologians Seek to Claim the World with God and Postmodernism," in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, vol. 46, issue 42 (June 23, 2000), p. A. 20.

⁵See David Van Biema, "Thinkers: God as Postmodern." *Time Magazine* (December 17, 2001):

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1001474,00.html#ixzz0y7OF5c76>.

a “demolition of modern, secular social theory.”⁶ But in order for Christian theology to accomplish this task, it must disavow and/or overcome its own pathos, or false humility, and reclaim its status as a metadiscourse. Christian theology must operate as the “ultimate organizing logic,” otherwise it falls prey to various forms of idolatry, making a God of modern secular reason. And for Milbank, the stakes could not be any higher, for “only Christian theology now offers a discourse able to position and overcome nihilism itself.”⁷ By Milbank’s reckoning, then, theologians will not simply reclaim any place at the academic table, but the place at the head of the table. What makes theology theological is its authority “to position, qualify or criticize other discourses,” willfully asserting its position as the queen of the sciences.⁸ As such, the logic of Christianity is undeconstructible because it is transcendent to, and independent of, secular reason.

If this was the promise, then the Milbank effect was the refashioning of what is essentially an imperialistic Christian logic as the condition of peace. But as Gavin Hyman has persuasively argued, this counter-narrative trope is “characterized by an inescapable violence,”⁹ which is particularly problematic for Milbank considering his apologetic on behalf of Christianity—namely, the logic of Christianity operates according to an ontology of peace rather than violence, and thus tells the much better story than secular reason. In Milbank’s words, “Christianity . . . recognizes no original violence.” On the contrary, the infinite is construed as “harmonic peace” founded in “the *sociality* of harmonious difference.”¹⁰ But while Milbank’s claim is that the Christian story respects difference, others have charged that his theology rests on a subsumption of difference that actually obliterates difference altogether.¹¹ This is the concern expressed by Victor Taylor regarding Milbank’s rendering of the materiality of Christ’s body. By simultaneously being and belonging to a totality of materiality, Milbank’s theological materialism “renders all difference as sameness” as “Christ/God becomes/is the ‘set of all sets’ as he dies *and* resurrects himself.” This divine act of collecting and sorting not only preserves the “concept of the ‘simple oneness’ and ultimacy of God,” but by Taylor’s analysis, actually *eradicates* “all difference in general, even different ideas.” What Milbank calls “peace”, therefore, Taylor rightfully describes as theological “hegemony”, giving clarity to the Milbank effect as an offer of peace under the condition of a “difference-less totalitarianism.”

Returning to bin Laden, it has been well chronicled how he subscribed to a “maximalist” understanding of religion, believing that religion ought to

⁶John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 1.

⁷Ibid., p. 6.

⁸Ibid., p. 1.

⁹See Gavin Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 73-77.

¹⁰Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 5.

¹¹For instance, see Hyman, p. 74.

permeate all aspects of human society.¹² As such, he constructed his grievance *against the West* in religious terms, leaving no room left for neutrality, hesitation, or middle ground. Just as clear is that his radical militancy left him increasingly isolated from, and as a source of embarrassment to, many of the Islamist leaders and ideologists with whom he had once had common cause. As early as 1996, when bin Laden left Sudan for Afghanistan, while he was forging his partnership with the Taliban to foment a worldwide jihad against the West, signs of failure for the jihad extremists in places such as Bosnia, Algeria, and Egypt were already apparent, effectively bringing the global Islamist movement to a standstill. This is a story told by Gilles Kepel, the prominent French scholar of radical Islam, even before the September 11 attacks in his book, *Jihad: The Trial of Political Islam*. As Kepel tells it, desperate terrorist acts have not, nor perhaps can they ever, “translate easily into political victory and legitimate power.”¹³

Of course, bin Laden continued to steal the headlines around the world, but meanwhile more and more Islamist leaders and groups were rejecting the violence by which bin Laden came to be defined, especially after that violence, once projected outward against the West, became a plague on its own territories and populations as the jihadist ideology provided sanction to sectarian purges as rival factions sought to wrest political control from their political rivals. In the place of—or more accurately, in the very midst of—this religious violence, there was what came to be termed the “Quiet Revolution” wherein Islamic political movements (most prominently in the case of Turkey and Indonesia, and perhaps on the horizon in Egypt and Tunisia) came to power through ballots, not bullets.¹⁴ In the words of Kepel, after the jihadist militants of bin Laden and his ilk failed to deliver on their promises to the Muslim world, “many Islamist leaders, ideologists, and intellectuals would advocate a clean break with armed struggle and seek ways of integrating the Muslim cultural heritage with democratic values, in opposition to the authoritarian behavior of the regimes.”¹⁵ So while the death of bin Laden was news, it must be noted that long before his death, the Islamist coalition that he claimed to represent were already looking “for ways to escape the cul-de-sac into which they had been led.”¹⁶

Like bin Laden, Milbank came to prominence at a particular moment in time when his defense of the singularity and exclusivity of Christian truth came to many as a welcome relief from the “current global tendencies toward increased mobility, indeterminacy, and hybridity” characteristic of most postmodernist

¹²See especially, Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion after September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

¹³Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trial of Political Islam*, translated by Anthony F. Roberts (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 19.

¹⁴See John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 4th Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 233-235.

¹⁵Kepel., p. 13.

¹⁶Ibid.

discourses.¹⁷ But by his radical posture against modern secular reason, his Radical Orthodoxy is not just defined as an anti-modernist movement, but as a kind of de-modernization. In this sense, the same analysis of the current appeal of religious fundamentalisms made by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt can be lodged against Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy as well – namely, they are driven by a “powerful refusal of the contemporary historical passage in course.” To say with Hardt and Negri that they are best understood “not as a *premodern* but as a *postmodern* project,”¹⁸ then, is not simply to agree with Don Cupitt’s critique that this represents a “laundered facsimile of tradition,”¹⁹ but as a distortion of a tradition and a denigration of history, it is a project without a future.

Milbank has always been up for a good debate. And in this book he proves a worthy partner to the dazzling and dizzying mind of Žižek. And Radical Orthodoxy has always been up for a good fight. Here in his debate with Žižek, for instance, Milbank pits the Catholic verses the Protestant metanarrative against one another, wherein Protestantism is good for nothing beyond “totalitarian gloom” (131). But such rhetorical excesses are so beyond the pale that to continue to fight back only legitimates the ridicule. Meanwhile the march of history continues apace. We can no more deny it than we can escape it. The Milbank effect has run its course. Unless and until he recognizes the violence endemic to the exclusionary logic he continues to propound, we can leave him and the Radical Orthodoxy he helped to create, safely in the past.

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¹⁷Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 150.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹⁹As quoted in Hyman, p. 74.