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# The 'Comeback of Christendom' or a 'Christian Cosmopolis'?: Dialogical Possibility in the work of John Milbank

Angus M. Slater

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Often taken to be largely hostile to engagement in inter-religious or inter-faith dialogue, contemporary forms of conservative post-modern Christian theology such as Radical Orthodoxy have been dismissed as irrevocably closed to the possibility of meaningful dialogue taking place between them and alternative religious traditions. This rather fraught relationship has recently come to the fore through exchanges on the ABC.net.au website between Joshua Ralston, and John Milbank and Adrian Pabst over the relationship between Radical Orthodoxy and Islam. However, this article demonstrates that while Milbank's later practice has indeed been characterised by a resort to a stance of out-narration in the context of inter-religious engagement, this does not fully reflect the space for dialogical possibility he allows for in his 1991 article, 'The End of Dialogue'. Instead, the article examines the early proposal as containing within it an allowance for an alternative strand of engagement by Radical Orthodoxy, based on mutual co-operation of differing religious traditions where they share 'coincidences of outlook'. The adoption of this strand as an addition to, not replacement of, the strand of out-narration displayed in Milbank's mode of practice seems to point the way forward towards a more equitable arena of engagement for Radical Orthodoxy with manifestations of religious plurality, but also offers resources for a better representation of the internal foundational characteristics of the Radical Orthodoxy reading of the Christian narrative.

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Keywords: Radical Orthodoxy, inter-religious dialogue, dialogical practice, conservative post-modern Christian theology

## The 'Comeback of Christendom' or a 'Christian Cosmopolis'?: Both / Neither in the Early Work of John Milbank

Recent discussions on the website of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation between Joshua Ralston, John Milbank and Adrian Pabst have brought to the fore the need for a sustained account of the practical methods by which engagement with alternative religious faiths, or alternative positions, might be conducted within the sphere of conservative post-modern Christian theology. Negotiations

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surrounding the place of Islam in Radical Orthodoxy's schema have exposed the absence of any coherent or settled understanding. While this aspect has always been an underdeveloped area in Radical Orthodoxy's attempt at a systematic theological account of society, the increasing incidence of religious and political plurality within our societies has made its resolution and exploration an progressively more important issue. Recent exchanges between Pabst's 'Beyond Ukraine and Gaza: The Battle for the Soul of the Wider West', Ralston's 'Islamophobia and the Comeback of Christendom: Riposte to Adrian Pabst', Milbank and Pabst's response 'Christian Cosmopolis, Bastion of all Believers: Response to Joshua Ralston' and (for now) the final response from Ralston 'How Political Theologians Should (Not) Engage with Islam: Responding to John Milbank and Adrian Pabst', have shown a deep need for a sustained exploration of the possibility of engagement and dialogue within the broader theological matrix of conservative post-modern Christian theology more generally (Hyman 1998: 394)<sup>1</sup> but also specifically within the Radical Orthodoxy movement. If, as seems to be hoped by its originators, Radical Orthodoxy is to provide a sustained account of a plural society that more adequately preserves difference and move beyond its current parochialism, this moving beyond talking about engagement and platitudinous gestures towards dialogue with the religious other becomes a necessity.

The move beyond the current fruitlessness of pluralistic forms of inter-religious dialogue and the parochialism of Radical Orthodoxy's attempts at the out-narration of alternative religious meta-narratives requires further explanation of the current space available for inter-religious engagement and dialogue within the Radical Orthodoxy movement itself. It is with this goal in mind that this article attempts to tease out the implications of Milbank's original rejection of liberal pluralistic forms of dialogue (Milbank 1991: 176-177) in his article 'The End of Dialogue', taking a second look at the possibility for a different form of dialogue to be developed from his original proposal. Given the possibility that a worthwhile proposal for the continuation of dialogue exists, Milbank's own practice must come under scrutiny if his talk of the viability of a Christian cosmopolis protecting and defending the religious liberty of others is to be taken as a serious proposal (Milbank & Pabst 2014). In doing so, Milbank's own practice in inter-religious engagement can be contrasted with the potential offered by alternative thinkers within Radical Orthodoxy and similar non-Christian movements which share practical concerns over the narrative of modernity, contemporary secular political formations, and the place of religious communities in society. Through this I hope to demonstrate the ability to develop a practical account of how engagement between differing

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1 The term 'conservative post-modern' term stems from Hyman (1998: 394) where it is used to draw a distinction between the 'conservative' post-modernism of Milbank, Williams, and Surin and the 'radical' post-modernism of Taylor, Altizer, and Cupitt.

religious traditions might be structured, constructed, and developed within the Radical Orthodoxy paradigm that moves beyond the current dysfunction recently seen on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's website and better reflects its own internal ideals.

## The Current Debate

The discussion currently taking place on the ABC.net.au website between Milbank, Pabst, and Ralston represents the latest in a long line of critical readings of Radical Orthodoxy's relation to alternative religious traditions, in this case Islam. The interesting development is the response provided to Ralston's initial critique by Pabst and Milbank which offers further depth to an account of this vital issue for Radical Orthodoxy.

The articles under discussion begin with a piece, written by Adrian Pabst, entitled 'Beyond Ukraine and Gaza: The Battle for the Soul of the Wider West' (Pabst 2014) which deals with an overview of contemporary geo-political issues in Europe and the Middle East, before using these as the background to a broader call for Christian unity between the West and Russia in the form of a covenantal commonwealth based on the 'enduring legacy of Christendom in East and West' (Pabst 2014). In proposing this, Pabst opens the article by drawing attention to forms of Islamic fundamentalism, arguing that their main enemy 'is not primarily the liberal West or the imperial United States, but instead Catholic and Orthodox Christendom' and that this threat overrides any internal division between the 'the remnants of Christendom' to be found in (Catholic) Europe and (Orthodox) Russia. He highlights this threat by writing that:

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed leader of the Islamic State stretching from Iraq to Syria, has called on Muslims to rally behind his pan-Islamic project:

*"Rush O Muslims to your state. It is your state. Syria is not for Syrians and Iraq is not for Iraqis. The land is for the Muslims, all Muslims. This is my advice to you. If you hold to it you will conquer Rome and own the world, if Allah wills."*

This should come as no surprise to anyone. For decades Sunni jihadists have waged war on Christian oriental communities across the Middle East and North Africa, while other Islamic extremists are fighting Russian Orthodoxy in the Caucasus and throughout Central Asia. In novel and frightening ways, this pits the militant strands of Sunni Islam not only against the more traditional forms of Sufism, including the Alawites in Syria, but also the remnants of Christendom. (Pabst 2014)

Dealing with the validity of this argument is not the aim of this piece and some important aspects will be drawn out through its engagement by Ralston in the proceeding article. For now, I merely wish to highlight the various characteristics Pabst believes will be better served by his particular proposals for society, in order to better judge the type of relationality and existence that Pabst, and the wider Radical Orthodoxy movement, value and desire.

The characteristics delineated by Pabst are alluded to in his closing argument, where he frames the creation of this Christendom inflected social order as both an overcoming of (Russian) chauvinist nationalism and (European) abstract cosmopolitanism, and as a necessary bulwark against the shared threat of Islamic fundamentalism. As he writes:

An imaginative approach to international affairs by the West would call to abandon false and dysfunctional either-ors in favour of strangely possible paradoxes. Not Pacific or Europe, state or market, religion or the secular, or nationalism versus globalisation. Instead, intimate reciprocities in ever-widening circles from your street to the planet can dimly reflect a family of nations and peoples in which states and markets serve the needs of persons, communities and associations within and across state borders. (Pabst 2014)

This article, and much of Radical Orthodoxy's general oeuvre, suggests that it is only by rejecting the false binaries produced by modernity that a truly harmonious society can emerge which lives *within* the difference expressed. As Pabst goes onto note:

Compared with the logic of abstraction that underpins realist, liberal and cosmopolitan ideas, such an alternative would link political to economic and ecological purpose in the name of mutuality, reciprocity and social recognition. (Pabst 2014)

Therefore it is these characteristics which Pabst suggests will be better served in his renewal of a type of neo-Christendom – mutuality, reciprocity, social recognition, non-binarism, and the servicing of the needs of communities and societies across state borders towards mutual flourishing. These characteristics, heavily reminiscent of Milbank's earlier ecclesiological and sociological exposition (Milbank 2006), define the alternative that Pabst envisions and provide the ground on which to judge movements towards alternative political formulations.

It is the broader argument put forward by Pabst that Ralston aims to engage with in his follow up piece 'Islamophobia and the Comeback of Christendom: Riposte to Adrian Pabst, not just in content but also in the way in which Pabst chooses to connect Islam with his wider proposal. In utilising references to Islam in a particular

way, it is Ralston's argument that Pabst engages in a reductive Islamophobic account in order to heighten the fear of Islam in the West in an attempt to make his proposal of a neo-Christendom more attractive. As he writes:

Islamophobia aids and abets Radical Orthodoxy's theo-political project of renewing Christendom. Why else would Adrian Pabst begin his recent article on Ukraine, Russian and Western Europe by invoking the spectre of ISIS and its pretender Khalifya, al-Baghdadi?. (Ralston 2014)

This highlights the extent to which he wishes to engage with the aim of Pabst, renewing a form of Christendom, but also the way in which he objects to Pabst's use of Islam in order to promote this aim. As Ralston goes on to note, it is not only Pabst that is guilty of reducing Islam to only the diametrically opposite of the Christian narrative but is also a recurring feature of much of the work of John Milbank. Ralston's argument extends from a particular critique of Pabst's positioning of Islam in his article to a broader critique of the way in which Radical Orthodoxy as a whole relates to, and treats, the narrative of Islam in its discussion of the revitalisation of the Christian narrative within secular modernity.

In connection with this general trend towards the reduction of Islam in the work of Radical Orthodoxy that Ralston identifies is the further identification of the purpose that this reductive account serves in both Pabst's original piece and in Milbank's wider work. Ralston argues that while Milbank does gesture in places, such as *The Future of Love* (Milbank 2009), towards 'something like a comparative political theology that might draw his own project into conversation with Islamic and Jewish thought' (Ralston 2014) ultimately the engagement of Islam by Radical Orthodoxy remains a resolutely Islamophobic one that denigrates and reduces the variety and diversity apparent within the tradition, represents Islam as Christendom's eternal rival, and applies differing standards of academic conduct and respect to Islam than to the Christian narrative which Milbank and Pabst both wish to promote. Beyond this is an identification of hypocrisy between the rhetorical call made by Pabst 'for grand bargains that resist "false and dysfunctional *either-ors*"' and the practical inscribing of exactly that form of either / or binary between the pure form of Christendom and the reduced and monolithic account of Islam offered.

Ralston's critique of Pabst and Radical Orthodoxy more generally is that the rhetorical narration of the Christian narrative in the form of calling for a renewed Christendom, fails to reflect in practice those characteristics initially identified as ultimately at the centre of Radical Orthodoxy's vision for a harmonically peaceful society that rejects false modernist binaries. However, Ralston has not gone unchallenged in this reading of Radical Orthodoxy. The two preceding articles elicited a response from both Pabst and Milbank, entitled 'Christian Cosmopolis,

Bastion of all Believers: Response to Joshua Ralston' (Milbank & Pabst 2014). This piece responds to Ralston's critique by accusing him of doing the same thing that he critiques Radical Orthodoxy for having done to Islam. While agreeing with Ralston on the need for a condemnation of all forms of religious fundamentalism and a rejection of the essentialisation of religious traditions, Pabst and Milbank reject Ralston's reading of their aim and his reading of their representation of Islam. As they write:

...to claim as he does that "Islamophobia aids and abets Radical Orthodoxy's theo-political project of renewing Christendom" is a grave charge. This accusation is closely connected with Ralston's rather insidious insinuation that Radical Orthodoxy is but a reactionary plot aimed at restoring the absolute power of the papacy and launching a new crusade against Muslims.

For all his talk about the need "to muster a more honest and coherent theological and political analysis of the forces that threaten the lives and well-being of people" in the Middle East and beyond, Ralston completely caricatures our position and misconstrues the current context. (Milbank & Pabst 2014)

In addition to this rejection of Ralston's critique, Milbank and Pabst also develop more fully the way in which they visualise the interaction between the renewed neo-Christendom proposed and the narrative of Islam. Arguing that the tolerance expressed by the secular is fundamentally damaging to the coherent polity of Islam (and Christianity) by only allowing space for the private and personal expression of religion, Milbank and Pabst argue that a Christian polity, one that is based on a total vision of society and a promotion of religious ideal and faith in politics, is better able to grasp, engage with, and provide space for a similar religious polity than the secular sphere.

This claim, developed by arguing that the 'idea of an alliance of all religions against secularisation is advanced where there is one religion that is culturally and politically pre-eminent' (Milbank & Pabst 2014), rests on the idea that the Christian polity as a total religious vision for society can respect alternative proposals for a total religious vision that come from differing religious traditions. Beyond this, the promotion of that religious vision for the whole of society cannot be shared between religious traditions or made up of a synthesis or base area of agreement between them. Rather, Milbank and Pabst argue that 'a genuinely "religious culture" has to be religious in a *specific* way' (Milbank & Pabst 2014) rejecting a "general religiosity" (as in the United States)' and 'neutral religious pluralism of the multiculturalist variety' as expressions on of the triumph of secularised social and political norms. Generally, therefore, Pabst and Milbank are engaging with the critique of their content offered by Ralston, rather than the critique offered of their practice. It is

this issue that becomes even more clear in the final piece of this exchange, Ralston's 'How Political Theologians Should (Not) Engage with Islam: Responding to John Milbank and Adrian Pabst'.

Ralston's response, while admitting certain rhetorical faults over his comparison between Radical Orthodoxy and Pope Urban II and his slightly reductive representation of Radical Orthodoxy as solely a project of anachronistic pre-modern retrieval, narrows in on this failure of Milbank and Pabst's response to adequately deal with the way in their representation of Islam in practice damages both the cohesive and coherent whole of the Islamic tradition, and the persuasive and rhetorical power of the Christian narrative as presented by Milbank and Pabst. In doing this, not only have Milbank and Pabst misrepresented certain aspects of the Islamic tradition in order to further their own project but they have simultaneously undermined the ability of their project to represent those things they wish it to - mutuality, reciprocity, social recognition, non-binarism, and the servicing of the needs of communities and societies across state borders. As Ralston notes:

For them, Islam remains fundamentally a rhetorical "other" invoked without sufficient nuance - a strategy that serves to reinforce the claim that only a Christendom political ecclesiology grounded in a participatory metaphysics is capable of interfaith cooperation and political pluralism. (Ralston 2014a)

It is this positioning of Islam as oppositional to the Christian inflected critique of secular modernity that makes up the Radical Orthodoxy project that drives Ralston's argument that the use of Islam in these articles is fundamentally Islamophobic, that is the misrepresentation of issues like the relationship between Salafism and Sunni Islam, the place and value of reason and the intellect in the tradition of the *Shari'ah*, the over-representation of violent and oppressive periods of Islamic history, and the place and history of the Caliphate, only exists within the position sketched out by Milbank and Pabst in order to heighten the fear of Islam within the western societies at which their Christendom project is aimed. In doing so the aim is not a dialogue or an engagement with Islam in a real sense, expecting no new knowledge or response from the Islamic tradition, but only the use and misuse of the symbol of Islam for their own ends.

As Ralston goes on to note, Milbank and Pabst fail to rise to the challenge of the constructive proposals initially offered about the possibility of useful and constructive exchange between 'Radical Orthodoxy's best insights and creative Sunni Muslim thinkers who offer constructive critique of our contemporary condition - marked as it is by violence, nationalism, the hegemony of the market, the militarisation of policing, and religious fundamentalism' (Ralston 2014a). As we have seen throughout this exchange there is a dysfunction at work within the



relationship between Radical Orthodoxy and Islam in practice, in the way in which the tradition of Islam is engaged with and represented within the wider work of Milbank. This current dysfunction exposed in the exchange at ABC.net.au emerges out of the underdeveloped way in which dialogue is approached and theorised within conservative post-modern Christian theology. The attempts at engagement that do occur lack the kind of integrity that comes about through a sustained link between practice and theory (Williams 1991: 140; Williams 1990). While it is perfectly possible to narrate one thing and act in a completely different way, this disruption between internal narration and external practice has been seen to have a profoundly negative effect on the reception of Radical Orthodoxy, having been a central focus of a number of direct and indirect critiques (Doak 2007, Hedges 2012, Sargent 2010). While, generally, the area of inter-religious dialogue or engagement has been an underdeveloped part of the broader conservative post-modern theological scene, and an underdeveloped part of the Radical Orthodoxy project in particular, this is not to say that the area has not been touched on at all. Due to the prominence of the narrative struggle against secular modernity, the appearance and place of alternative religions within broader society has taken on a somewhat lesser importance than might be expected or hoped for. As has been alluded to by Ralston those incidences of practice that have come to characterise Radical Orthodoxy and its engagement with alternative religious traditions do not represent the totality of the possibility for a radically orthodox approach to dialogue. The rest of this article considers the extent to which this displayed disconnect is a necessary part of Radical Orthodoxy's approach to matters of inter-religious dialogue and whether there potential for a differing method of practice to emerge from between Radical Orthodoxy and thinkers in the Islamic tradition.

## The 'End of Dialogue'?

One of the few areas where Milbank addresses the relationship between the Christian narrative and alternative religious narratives is the rather early article 'The End of Dialogue'. The context of the publication of this essay within *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (D'Costa 1990) is particularly important. The volume was written as a deliberate response to the earlier publication of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religion*. This volume, edited by John Hick and Paul Knitter, attempted to argue for a generally pluralistic understanding of religions and for 'a move away from the insistence on the superiority or finality of Christ and Christianity towards recognition of the independent validity of other ways' (Hick & Knitter 1987: viii). As a rebuttal, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered* rejects the premise of the preceding book, containing a variety of diverse positions all sharing a rejection of, or suspicion about, the pluralistic model of dialogue and religious relation proposed in *The Myth*. This opposition between the two books, and the positions proposed by

each of them, leads to a particular polemical relationship between the two that can most clearly be seen in the constant referencing between them, both book to book and also by individual authors engaging with the particular arguments contained in the opposing book. This can be seen in Milbank's reference and rebuttal of Panikkar, Reuther, and Suchocki, (Milbank 1990: 175-182) in differing parts of his contribution to the volume. In particular, this relationship between the two books has had an impact on the rhetorical strategies employed by the various contributors to *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, leading towards a more aggressive and polarised discussion.

Milbank's position in this article stems from a broad rejection of the currently dominant pluralistic methodology of inter-religious engagement that, he argues, privileges a secular conception of religious belonging and a western conception of the definition and practice of religion. In addition to this, Milbank also identifies the assumption of similarity between religious traditions and the assumption that specifically western understandings of concepts such as justice or the good can be universalised into ideals for dialogue and dialogical practice between religious traditions as problematic areas for the pluralistic models, especially given the self-described aims of the pluralistic model. While Milbank does call for an end to, and narrates against, the typically pluralistically formed style of dialogue with other religious traditions, his desire to sound the death knell of dialogue in response to the model deployed in *The Myth* has led to the overlooking of some of the more subtle points he makes by secondary readers and commentators<sup>2</sup>. Moving beyond an outright rejection of all forms of dialogue in favour of a stance solely made up of out-narration, the re-presentation of 'an alternative mythos, equally unfounded, but nonetheless embodying an 'ontology of peace' (Milbank 2006: 279) in contrast to the violence seen as inherent within the liberal secular pluralistic model, Milbank instead defines religions as sharing a consideration about "what there is". He writes that:

The commonness that pertains between the different religions is therefore not the commonness of a genus, or of a particular specified mode of human existence; instead it is the commonness of Being (Milbank 1991, 177).

In his criticism of a chapter within *The Myth* written by Raimundo Panikkar, Milbank repeats this point more forcefully: 'These theoretical and practical problems with the ontologically pluralist position reveal that while religions may be incommensurable, this does not mean that they can be envisaged as lying peacefully side by side, without mutual interference' (Milbank 1991: 189). These

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2 I feel this is particularly true of Sargent's reading of Milbank's position of epistemic isolation and incommensurability in his critique (Sargent 2010, 822-823).

particular clarifications highlight the way in which Milbank's proposals maintain a form of relationship between religious traditions even while calling for the end of pluralistically formed dialogue. For Milbank, it is their shared attempt to 'provide varying accounts of Being itself or of "what there is"' (Milbank 1991: 188) that make up the communal features of religion rather than an attachment to a particularly western conception of religiosity or religion. This shared feature opens a space for a type of exchange based on conversion or conversation within his theoretical modelling undertaken in 'The End of Dialogue' rather than merely the assimilation that he has exposed is at work within the pluralistic model, or the pure out-narration of which he has been accused.

These aspects make it clear that while Milbank sounds the end of dialogue in the fashion proposed by the contributors to *The Myth*, presenting an alternative narration to oppose their own fundamentally secular reading of the possibility for a religious challenge to the meta-narrative formation of secular modernity, he concomitantly suggests that it is necessary for the Christian tradition to continue to converse with other religions in a purposeful fashion that avoids the same fall to assumed similarity and acceptance of secular norms evidenced above. This conversation proposed not only attempts to respect the integral difference of the Other, in a way that the pluralistic model does not, but also seeks to emphasise the very apparent differences between religious traditions in the name of comparison and preservation. As well as pointing the way in which such an encounter can lead a Christian into a deeper understanding of the Gospels, this furthers Milbank's reference to the possibility of a dialogue between religious traditions based around 'coincidences of outlook' (Milbank 1991: 185) in the desires of the differing discourses. These coincidences allow for the possibility of inter-religious engagement within Milbank's model around shared coincidences in outlook between religious traditions. As an example of these, Milbank identifies a 'widespread opposition to usury' (Milbank 1991: 185) in religious traditions as a specific example, but also the more comprehensive search for 'modes of cultural existence not under the aegis of liberal capitalism' (Milbank 1991: 185) as a point of possible joint narration and engagement between differing religious traditions.

The possibility of this new kind of dialogue, a tangential comparison of aims and themes rather than an attempted comparison of differing religious traditions within a specified constructed genus or type based on the particularities of the western, secular, experience of the category "religion", is made more apparent when Milbank writes that:

in certain circumstances, and in the context of a search for modes of cultural existence not under the aegis of liberal capitalism, and more respectful of religions as social projects than the sovereign liberal state can dare to be,

these coincidences could indeed provide the religions with something useful to talk about. (Milbank 1991: 185)

For Milbank, the joint experience of resistance to the narrative of secular modernity is the starting point for the possibility of a new model of inter-religious relation, providing a better ground for practical discussion and co-operation than the reduction seen in the implementation of the pluralistic model. This break-out from the confines of liberal pluralistic dialogue through a discourse not based on issues like social justice or a nebulous conception of the Good, but instead on fleeting instances of shared outlooks or shared points of resistance to secular modernity, opens the door to comparisons and evaluations of the way in which religious traditions can take a joint stand on certain issues that impact them all.

The criticisms expressed of the pluralistic model of inter-religious dialogue are therefore not heralding the end of all possible dialogue as may be inferred from Milbank's 'The End of Dialogue' title, but rather a hopeful statement of the end of a particular and, in Milbank's view, fatally flawed method of engaging in dialogue. His proposal therefore ends up being a balance between space for a constructive dialogue around shared points of mutual interest, and a polemical attempt at out-narrating the liberal pluralistic approach to matters of inter-religious relation. While the pluralistic model may see agreement between religions as an example of a wider, meta-level, agreement with a universalised notion of religion, the non-pluralistic model allowed for here brackets the agreement from any deeper resonance, focusing only on the fleeting agreement between the differing traditions brought about by a shared coincidence of outlook. This attempt to restrict the impulse toward systematisation based on similarity also necessitates a place for difference within the model, a difference that is equally as significant for the understanding of the relationship as the points of similarity are. For a cogent explication of another religious tradition, the points of difference between that tradition and the Christian tradition are as vital as the points of similarity as they provide meaning in a way that is reduced and ultimately extinguished when similarity is the sole focus of engagement. Instead space is provided for a dual model that can tend towards the preservation of tension between the simultaneous similarity / difference expressed in the complex multiplicities of relation and exchange between religious traditions in religiously plural societies.

Following on from this hesitancy about universalising instances of agreement or disagreement between religious traditions, is a space for a greater and more authentic respect for the self-hood of the other discourses involved in the instance of inter-religious dialogue. While Milbank is focused on the process of conversion and out-narration in his wider project, his delineation of non-pluralistic dialogue is somewhat more nuanced, relying on a mutual engagement by religious traditions

in narrating their shared place in opposition to the modern secular narrative. In bringing this joint placement to the fore, a certain respect for the true otherness of the alternative religious tradition, both to the narrative of secular modernity and to the Christian narrative, is unfolded. This would require, a placement of the other into the instance of dialogue in such a way that an authentic totality or representation of the other is respected, by bringing those parts of the alternative narrative that disagree, as well as agree, with the Christian narrative into play in instances of non-pluralistic dialogue. There are therefore two strands to the possible proposal unfolded here. First, a stress on the difference between the religious traditions that requires a stance of mutual suspicion, while secondly as a counter to this, Milbank also sees room for a shared narration by religious traditions against the discourse of secular modernity. This balancing between the two strands apparent in the model allows for the possibility of preserving the sense of Christian out-narration apparent within Radical Orthodoxy, while also allowing for the possibility for a certain form of dialogue to remain viable without the reduction of difference implied by the pluralistic appeal to a minimal sense of tolerance.

Between these two approaches floats a broader opposition to violence, whether the violence Milbank identifies within alternative religious traditions, or the form found within the meta-narrative of liberal, secular, capitalistic, modernity. In this, Milbank's proposals for inter-religious engagement are not just a reduction to a combative out-narration, but contain the possibility for a constructive strand to inter-religious engagement as well. Although this strand is only hesitant and remains under-developed, its identification remains important for an analysis of later instances of inter-religious engagement. Milbank's practical interventions and engagements can then be judged in the light of a better understanding of his original theoretical and conceptual modelling of the purpose of inter-religious engagement, allowing the revelation of how well this conceptual modelling has been delivered in his practice of inter-religious engagement.

## **Practical Engagements**

While Milbank's 'The End of Dialogue' lays the ground for two approaches to the issue of religious plurality, one of out-narration and conversion from violence into peace, the other of a form of dialogue and mutual narration between religious tradition over shared political and social positions, Milbank's actual engagement in instances of inter-religious contact has ultimately failed to mirror this dual approach. Throughout his work, Milbank has relied on out-narration as his favoured and it seems, only, approach to the presence of religious plurality in contemporary societies. This significantly weakens the wider Radical Orthodoxy project, especially in its ability to relate to and interact with alternative religious narratives and their communities. This inability to effectively relate to plurality has become an increasingly prominent

issue for the systematic account of society proffered by Milbank, particularly given the significance that this religious diversity has come to play in the negotiation of our contemporary multicultural and multi-faith societies.

In his more recent work, the matter of alternative religious traditions has remained a minor issue, usually only addressed in the context of a wider, and specifically Christian, narration. Further to this, the engagement, when it occurs, has tended to only focus on Islam rather than any sustained engagement with, or attempt at out-narration of, any other non-Christian religious narrative (Milbank 2009, 397). Milbank's use of Islam reinforces the shift towards an adversarial relationship between Christianity and Islam, but also between the particular narration of his own understanding of the Christian narrative over and against those alternative forms. Milbank distinguishes the particularity of Catholic Christianity most clearly when he writes:

A contemporary gloss might conclude that it is Islam, Judaism and Protestantism's lack of a magisterium which encourages both anarchic and state terror to be conducted falsely in their name (Milbank 2009: 395).

There is no appearance of a conciliatory, mutually respectful out-narration of modernity by all religions as we saw space for in his original and early proposals. Instead we find a re-assertion of the priority of the specifically Anglo-Catholic Christian narrative that Milbank narrates. We find this assertion of the opposition of Christianity to other religious narratives in the same way that Milbank sees an opposition between the narratives of modernity and Christianity is carried through into the sphere of social and political action that forms a large part of his message in this article. This is continued in the section '*The Politics of Paradox*' in the same volume, where Milbank attempts to sketch out the arena in which the Christian narrative now finds itself, writing:

The second sphere of Radical Orthodoxy's practical involvement is the political. As Philip Blond has suggested, there are now three crucial global forces in the world: capitalist rationality, Islam and Christianity. And of the latter two, the global reach of Christianity is far more serious and far more likely to prevail in the long-term. (Milbank 2009: 397)

In this, Milbank sets up a direct opposition between both Christianity and Islam, as well as between Christianity and capitalist rationality. While previously, Islam has been seen as a possible ally to the Christian narration against secular modernity, here it is a direct competitor. Milbank's dismissal of the threat seems to run counter to this interpretation however, in aligning himself with Blond's conception, Islam has an equal importance to the narrative of capitalist rationality as an opponent of Milbank's neo-Christendom.

Milbank's practice of inter-religious dialogue and his mentions of Islam in '*The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*' have a different character to the earlier passages examined. We can see movement from the 'coincidences of outlook' model as present in '*The End of Dialogue*', to a confrontational model where alternative religious traditions – especially Islam – have become rival narratives to Christianity, of the same order as the rival narrative of secular modernity. Other religious traditions have begun to take on a more prominent role in Milbank's writing from this point, with an increasing focus on political forms of Islam and the relationship between Christianity, Islam and the West. While this is unsurprising, given the increased importance of political forms of Islam over the last decade, Milbank's reaction to the increasing role Islam is playing in world politics is one that is not in alignment with his previous expression of solidarity between religious out-narrations of secular modernity, nor with the social and ecclesiological characteristics identified as the goals of the broader Radical Orthodoxy movement. What has happened is the formation of a sustained and systematic methodology of out-narration and appropriation which has come to characterise Milbank's practical approach to the matter of inter-religious relation (Hedges 2012). This tendency is particularly clear in his recent attempts to engage with a more popular audience through the medium of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, specifically in his article 'Christianity, the Enlightenment, and Islam' (Milbank 2010), written in response to Ayaan Hirsi Ali, where the use of Islam showcases an appropriative attitude towards part of the narrative, while adopting a rather reductive account of other aspects. While it caused a storm on the internet blogosphere for some comments about the "lamentably premature collapse of the Western colonial empires", in general terms Milbank uses Islam to give his proposal for a joint narration between Christianity and the Enlightenment more force. For example, reversing his earlier position, he writes:

Yet in important ways Christianity has more in common with the Enlightenment legacy than it has with Islam. Both see the role of reason as central and both favour tolerance and open debate, whereas Islam, on the whole, is more equivocal about these values. (Milbank 2010)

At this point Milbank has reversed his earlier positioning of Islam as a narrative more closely entwined with Christianity than secular modernity that became apparent in his attempt at polemical out-narration in '*The End of Dialogue*'. He is drawing attention to those points of coincidence or shared outlooks between the narrative of Christianity and secular modernity in an attempt to build a consensus for shared narration. This perfectly outlines the driving motives behind Milbank's appropriation of alternative narratives to Christianity – a strengthening and reinforcement of his Christian narrative. Whenever the possibility of a coincidence of outlook or a shared aim becomes apparent between Christianity and another narrative, then Milbank is willing to appropriate it, even if this runs counter to his



previous attempts to narrate against that narrative. We also see within *'Christianity, the Enlightenment and Islam'* an attempt at the co-option of the alternative narrative of modernity, rather than a purely tangential alliance. This represents an important further step to the model of dialogue proposed by Milbank in *'The End of Dialogue'*, succumbing to the problems he highlights with the liberal pluralistic forms of dialogue he is attempting to out-narrate. When Milbank writes:

It is also true that radical Islamists are systematically infiltrating Western educational institutions. I would agree with Ayaan that in the face of all this Christians need to take a more militant approach to mission and that, in the name of freedom, secularists should welcome such a venture,(Milbank 2010), he is looking for a way to subsume the narrative power of the secular modern meta-narrative within the wider strategy of specifically Christian narration. This sublimation bears a striking similarity to the same 'reduction to the same' that Milbank accuses the pluralistic models of inter-religious dialogue as being complicit with and highlights the pragmatic nature of his engagement with other religious traditions.

This pragmatic appropriation of narratives when it suits the tactical need of Milbank's Christian narrative reveals itself again in the closing paragraph of *'Christianity, the Enlightenment and Islam'*, where Milbank attempts to separate the idea of the modern Enlightenment from the 'ravages of Western capitalism'. He writes:

Political Islam offers itself as a new international, but non-colonial, vehicle for Third World identity. Unfortunately, it also perpetuates over- simplistic accounts of the imperial past and fosters a spirit of resentful rather than self-sustaining and creative response to the ravages of Western capitalism. (Milbank 2010)

In this passage Milbank takes a reductive attitude to the plurality of contemporary Islam, ignoring the variety and depth of Islamic critiques of modernity, instead reducing this possible narrative ally only to the marker of 'Political Islam'. In doing so, he separates the idea of 'political Islam' from the type of Islam that he approves of<sup>3</sup>, thereby not only employing a reductive understanding of the nature of Islam as a religion, but also dividing the narrative opposition to Christianity between 'political' and 'non-political' Muslims. In his criticism of Islam, Milbank has pre-figured the same rhetorical outcome that has been identified by Ralston, an

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3 *Christianity, the Enlightenment and Islam*, p.3: "What the West needs to do, I maintain, is to encourage the growth of more mystical forms of Islam, which are also the forms that stress a religious mode of organisation that is not directly a political one, or even necessarily a legal one".



account of Islam that seeks to criticise its reductivism, used solely in opposition to the Christian narrative, and the misrepresents or fails to engage with the depth of material available. Although more focused on a few of Milbank's earlier pieces, this account can also be discerned in his discussion of *Shari'ah* law in 'Shari'a and the True Basis of Group Rights: Islam, the West, and Liberalism' (Milbank 2010a) and his discussion of the terror attacks of 9/11 in 'Sovereignty, Empire, Capital, and Terror' (Milbank 2002: 306) where Islam is engaged with seemingly not as a valid expression of a differing account of "what there is" but rather as a tactical tool for the purposes of broader out-narration. Although this aspect is somewhat tempered in his more recent work, including *Beyond Secular Order* (Milbank 2014a), and there is a certain clarification of position brought forth through his ABC.net.au articles 'We Have Never Been Secular: Rethinking Religion and Secularity in Britain Today' (Milbank 2014b) and 'Christian Cosmopolis, Bastion of all Believers: Response to Joshua Ralston' (Milbank & Pabst 2014), each of these newer works skirts around an actual instance of engagement with alternative religious narratives, specifically Islam, instead gesturing towards the possibility of engagement in order to postpone its actual necessity.

In focusing solely on the process of out-narration in his interaction with alternative religious narratives to the exclusion of the dialogical encounters that he provides space for in his original model, Milbank has only reinforced some of the issues for which his wider project is more generally criticised. His tendency towards employing out-narration as his approach has led to an appropriative and reductive account of alternative religious traditions being foregrounded within his work, often, as Hedges and others have noted, presenting them as significantly different to contemporary academic understandings in order to further his argument (Hedges 2012 125). This reductive tendency does violence to the self-understandings of the alternative religious traditions, as well as only providing Milbank with a short term, tactical, advantage in the process of out-narration. While this may be useful in the short-term, the nature of his practice of out-narration reduces the possibility of dialogical engagement of the kind he proposes in 'The End of Dialogue' occurring, as, in adopting this approach, Milbank undermines the ability of alternative narratives to engage co-operatively with him where coincidences of outlook do occur, reduces the possibility of the necessary trust and integrity for dialogical encounters of that kind to occur, and re-inscribes the very political marginalisation of religious communities he critiques the liberal, pluralistic, model of dialogue for. In doing so, Milbank fails to model in his practice the theoretical commitments of the 'unfounded mythos' that he attempts to narrate.

Milbank's practical interventions into the arena of religious plurality have therefore over-emphasised the out-narration strand of his original model, to the detriment of

his relationships with alternative religious traditions within society. This detriment is clearly seen in the intense criticism that his practice of engagement has drawn not just from Ralston, but also from others working in the same area. Milbank's instances of engagement since the publication of 'The End of Dialogue' show the necessity of practicing both strands of the non-pluralistic model originally shown to be available. While the process of out-narration and conversion is undoubtedly an important part of this model, Milbank's engagements have shown that an over-emphasis on this aspect can lead to the violent intellectual reduction of the very alternative narratives with which a joint narration against the meta-narrative of secular modernity is proposed. This violence undercuts the Christian meta-narrative's claim to peace in harmony, while also neglecting the possibility of shared positions in resistance to secular modernity between religious communities and traditions. Given this, Milbank's current practice can be seen as a deformation of the original possibility of inter-religious engagement within the context of conservative post-modern Christian theology, through its over-emphasis on the strand of out-narration and its concomitant neglect of the dialogical strand. This deformation has not only had an impact on the particular sphere of inter-religious engagement within Milbank's project but, through its appropriative, reductive, and violent attitude and practice, has undercut the central claim of 'peace in harmony' being found within Milbank's conceptualisation of the Christian narrative.

## Conclusion

The identification of a split between Milbank's earlier conception of the way in which plurality can, and should be, understood within society and his later practice in instances of engagement naturally leads onto questions of how a resolution or amelioration of this difficulty and dysfunction can come to be. While the over-emphasis, and over-practice, of the out-narration strand of original model has led to significant criticism of Milbank's approach to matter of religious plurality, particularly in the arenas of ecclesiology and politics (Doak 2007: 370), the original proposal offers space for the balancing of this strand of out-narration with the possibility of dialogical and co-operative encounters between religious traditions such as those suggested by Ralston between Radical Orthodoxy and contemporary Sunni critics of Islam. While this has not occurred to any great extent in Milbank's actual engagement, this is not to say that it could not or, given the objections raised to Milbank's practice, should not occur in the kind of situations envisioned in the original proposal. These circumstances, coincidences of outlook between competing, but broadly aligned, religious traditions in response to their shared construction and positioning by the meta-narrative of secular modernity, offer up a distinct and balancing possibility for the practice of inter-religious engagement that remains within the broader bounds of the Radical Orthodoxy project. A renewed focus on this co-operative strand of engagement seems to offer the possibility for

a redress of current practices of engagement towards a more equitable and less appropriative stance that better fulfils the desired demonstration of Christian peace than current instances of engagement.

Of the three Islamic thinkers mentioned by Ralston (Ralston 2014), I would point to Khaled Abou El Fadl as offering perhaps the best mix of authenticity, centrality, and relevance for an engagement between Islam and Radical Orthodoxy based on the co-operative mode identified earlier in this article. His situation as a scholar in the West, working within the context of a minority religious community provides a similar frame of outlook to the position of Radical Orthodoxy as a sub-movement with the broader stream of Christian theology, while his reformist project towards the Law better reflects the substantive process of retrieval and representation (Abou El Fadl 2001) also attempted by Milbank in his wider project (Milbank 1991a). Although this article does not aim to develop this point, further research in this area seems to offer the possibility of a fruitful cross-tradition engagement around issues such as secularism, political theology, as well as methodologies for the practice of inter-religious relationships and engagements, between Milbank and Abou El Fadl. Ralston himself notes the promise of engagements like these but, perhaps distracted by Milbank's deformative over-practice of out-narration, misses the possibility of an alternative approach apparent in Milbank's original proposals. The renewal proposed here requires a serious commitment to attempting to display in practice those characteristics deemed integral to the theoretical conceptualisation of the Christian narrative in Radical Orthodoxy's broader project. As the Christian community or narrative comes to be associated with reductive or appropriative practice in dialogue this necessarily has an impact on the seriousness with which its narration of internal characteristics like peace and harmony will be taken by other narrative communities undermining the persuasiveness of the unfounded narrative provided by Radical Orthodoxy.

This article hopes to have clarified some important issues raised by the ongoing conversation between Milbank, Pabst, and Ralston played out on ABC.net.au, as well as sketching out the possibility for moving beyond the rather hostile exchanges displayed there. Milbank's original proposals regarding the place of religious plurality within contemporary society provide space within them a two-stranded model of engagement, flexing between the need for out-narration over areas of disagreement, and co-operative dialogue over areas of agreement such as against the construction of religious narratives within the meta-narrative of secular modernity. While Milbank's later practice in this area has been almost completely characterised by a resort to the practice of out-narration, and an intellectually reductive, appropriative, and violent form of out-narration, this does not characterise the totality of approaches available to Radical Orthodoxy, nor to conservative post-

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modern Christian theology more generally. Instead this article hopes to have sketched out some possible resources for the beginning of a development of a model of practice for the co-operative strand of dialogue originally envisioned. This model of practice, involving the better display of fundamental characteristics of the Christian narrative in instances of dialogue through the rejection of violence and respect for the other, offers up hope that religious traditions in our plural societies can both jointly narrate against the meta-narrative of secular modernity, and also co-operate effectively around those coincidences of outlook that they share. By engaging with religious plurality in a way that is characterised by the two-stranded approach examined here, Radical Orthodoxy is offered a way strengthening both its narration against secular modernity and its practical mirroring of key ethical commitments internal to the story of Christ. Through this a better reflection of the Christian cosmopolis envisioned by Milbank can come to be.

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