55 John Milbank: *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (1990)

Introduced by Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Florian Zemmin

Introduction

John Milbank (b. 1952) is an Anglican-Catholic theologian and professor emeritus in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Nottingham, as well as being president of the Centre of Theology and Philosophy there. Milbank received a BA in modern history from The Queen's College, Oxford, and an MA in theology from Westcott House, Cambridge. He received his Doctor of Philosophy degree from the University of Birmingham. In 1998, he was awarded a senior Doctor of Divinity degree from the University of Cambridge, in recognition of his work. Milbank became known for founding the *Radical Orthodoxy* movement (with Graham Ward and Catherine Pickstock), which stands in clear opposition to liberal strands of "radical theology" in Britain. *Radical Orthodoxy* relates positively to ancient philosophy and medieval Christian theology, and sharply opposes rationalism and secularism. Both are rejected for making humanity its own arbiter of truth. Milbank's work is also informed by postmodern forms of philosophy, even though he opposes the latter's relativisation of truth.

The secular, according to Milbank, is a historical and normative formation, rather than a natural universal given that was superseded by religion before modernity. In this regard, Milbank shares basic premises with thinkers such as Charles Taylor (text no. 40) and Talal Asad (text no. 56). Milbank places more explicit value on religious wholesomeness than on societal differentiation, however. This goes hand in hand with denouncing the very bases of social theory, favouring an all-encompassing theological interpretation of the world and society – a juxtaposition known from fundamental criticism of the Enlightenment found in other traditions, too. Most influential in this regard was his book *Theology and Social Theory* (1990), which is considered a founding document of the *Radical Orthodoxy* movement. In the section of this book reprinted below, Milbank deals with the genealogy of political science, whose institutionalisation of the secular, he argues, laid the basis for all future social sciences. Whilst this institutionalisation also drew on certain theological strands, he sees it as marking an instrumentalisation and individualisation of reason, that fundamentally goes against properly understood Christian ontology.

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1 Political Theory and the New Science of Politics

The New Object of Political Science

Once, there was no 'secular'. And the secular was not latent, waiting to fill more space with the steam of the 'purely human', when the pressure of the sacred was relaxed. Instead there was the single community of Christendom, with its dual aspects of *sacerdotium* and *regnum.* The *saeculum*, in the medieval era, was not a space, a domain, but a time – the interval between fall and *eschaton* where coercive justice, private property and impaired natural reason must make shift to cope with the unredeemed effects of sinful humanity.

The secular as a domain had to be instituted or *imagined*, both in theory and in practice. This institution is not correctly grasped in merely negative terms as a desacralization. It belongs to the received wisdom of sociology to interpret Christianity as itself an agent of secularization, yet this thesis is totally bound up with the one-sided negativity of the notion of desacralizing; a metaphor of the removal of the superfluous and additional to leave a residue of the human, the natural and the self-sufficient. For this negative conception it is convenient that there should always have been some perception of the pure remainder, and the hybrid 'Judeo-Christianity' is cast in this role: from its inception, it supposedly removes sacral allure from the cosmos and then, inevitably, from the political, the social, the economic, the artistic – the human 'itself'.[. . .]

Received sociology altogether misses the positive institution of the secular, because it fully embraces the notion of humanism as the perennial destiny of the West and of human autonomous freedom as always gestating in the womb of 'Judeo-Christianity'. However, in this respect it is doomed to repeat the self-understanding of Christianity arrived at in late-medieval nominalism, the Protestant reformation and seventeenth-century Augustinianism, which completely privatized, spiritualized and transcendentalized the sacred, and concurrently reimagined nature, human action and society as a sphere of autonomous, sheerly formal power. Sociology projects this specific mutation [p. 9/10] in Christianity back to its origins and even to the Bible. It

interprets the theological transformation at the inception of modernity as a genuine 'reformation' which fulfils the destiny of Christianity to let the spiritual be the spiritual, without public interference, and the public be the secular, without private prejudice. Yet this interpretation preposterously supposes that the new theology simply brought Christianity to its true essence by lifting some irksome and misplaced sacred ecclesial restrictions on the free market of the secular, whereas, in fact, it instituted an entirely different economy of power and knowledge and had to invent 'the political' and 'the State', just as much as it had to invent 'private religion'.

This consideration should govern how we view the first social theory that claimed to be a 'science', namely 'political science'. With the writings of Grotius, Hobbes and Spinoza, political theory achieved a certain highly ambiguous 'autonomy' with regard to theology. However, autonomization was not achieved in the sphere of knowledge alone; it was only possible because the new science of politics both assumed and constructed for itself a new autonomous object – the political – defined as a field of pure power. Secular 'scientific' understanding of society was, from the outset, only the self-knowledge of the self-construction of the secular as power. What theology has forgotten is that it cannot either contest or learn from this understanding as such, but has either to accept or deny its object. [. . . p. 10/11. . .]

[T]he sphere of the artificial, of *factum,* marks out the space of secularity. For Harvey Cox it is precisely this area of the free play of human constructive choice which formed the 'dominion' granted to Adam in Eden, as the counterpart to the individual and secret submission of the soul to God.[1]

However, the 'obvious' connection of the *factum* and the secular can and must be called into question. It is not enough just to point out, like Hannah Arendt or Jurgen Habermas, that the concentration of post-Hobbesian political science on instrumental reason tended to obscure another dimension of human action, namely Aristotelian *praxis*, where one seeks not to control with precision, but with a necessary approximation to persuade, exhort and [p. 11/12] encourage a growth in the virtues as ends in themselves.[2] This displacement of classical politics by a new political 'science' is of course very important, yet what these thinkers ignore is the fact that the sphere of the 'artificial' is not necessarily identical with that of the instrumental, any more than poetry is merely technology. [. . . p. 12/13]

Both insofar as it was deemed natural and insofar as it was deemed artificial, the new autonomous object of political science was not, therefore, simply 'uncovered'. The space of the secular had to be invented as the space of 'pure power'. However, this invention was itself, as we shall now see, a theological achievement, just as only a particular sort of theology could pronounce the *etsi Deus non daretur*.

1 [note 9 in the original] Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (London: SCM, 1967) pp. 21–4.

2 [note 10 in the original] Jurgen Habermas, 'The classical doctrine of politics in relation to social philosophy', in *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (London: Heinemann, 1974) pp. 41–82.

The Theological Construction of Secular Politics

[. . . p. 13–18] That it was first of all the Church, the *sacerdotium*, rather than the *regnum*, which assumed traits of modern secularity – legal formalization, rational instrumentalization, sovereign rule, economic contractualism – ought to give us pause for thought. In a way, it was the increasing failure of the Church to be the Church, to preserve the 'rule of the Gospel' in the monasteries, and somehow to extend this to the laity (a failure of which the Christian humanist movement was often profoundly aware), which created a moral vacuum which the *regnum* could not easily fill, because ideals of a *purely political* virtue had been half-obliterated by Christianity. In such a vacuum, it seems likely that formal instrumentalism must increasingly reign, and this becomes still more likely after the further ecclesiastical failure which led to a divided Christendom. However, this is a retrospectively interpolated likelihood; one much too easily assumes that this formalism would be inevitably forthcoming. On the contrary, one must suppose that it could only fill the gaps because it was elaborated in theological terms, and by an ecclesiastical practice increasingly ready to redraw the bounds of *regnum* and *sacerdotium* as that between public, coercive power (the hierocratic state) and private faith (the Church as consequently mere 'aggregate'). Hence it may be that the voluntarist theological legacy allowed Europe to survive the Reformation by helping to engender the extraordinary seventeenth-century discovery of a politics that might persist and grow altogether 'without virtue' and without any substantive consensus.

Modern Politics and Biblical Hermeneutics

So far, we have seen how 'the secular' became an artificial *space* which was sheer *dominium*, or the sphere of the arbitrary. However, modern political science had also to cope with the secular which remained an interval of *time* (the *saeculum*) and with that ecclesial time with which it was concurrent. The [p. 18/19] new, secular *dominium* could not, according to the totalizing logic of wilful occupation which now mediated transcendence in the public realm, really tolerate a 'political' Church as a cohabitant. Hence it was first necessary, with Marsiglio and Luther, to produce the paradox of a purely 'suasive' Church which must yet involve external state coercion for its self-government.[3] It was then further necessary, with Hobbes, to exclude all 'private' inspiration from politics, by declaring the temporal 'interval' to be for the present 'the all', because the time of inspiration was over, bound and canonized, and its promises now exclusively referred

3 [note 41 in the original] Marsilius of Padua, *The Defender of the Peace*, trans. Alan Gewirth, vol. 2 ch. 6 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956) pp. 24, xix, 274ff.

to an eschatological, though literal and material, future.[4] Nevertheless, the surviving presence of the authoritative text of the Scriptures within the new space of sovereign power could not be denied. It was even essentially *required* by this power, as the source of a positive divine reconfirmation of the covenantal principle, and for the truth that God stood behind the positive authority of nature. However, one use of the Bible had to be prohibited. This was its truly Catholic use, which accorded interpretative authority to a *tradition* of reading, to readers whose power proceeded not from arms, property or contract, but rather from their socially made available time for reading. It was therefore necessary for the new political science to 'capture' from Catholic Christianity the text of the Bible: to produce a new Biblical hermeneutic. [. . . p. 19–22. . .]

This 'capturing of the Biblical text' may not seem quite so constitutive for modern politics as voluntarist theology. Nevertheless, it remains latent, and the banishing of traditional ecclesial time served to reinforce a commitment to the illusion of spatial immediacy and to the exorcism of the metaphorically ambiguous. Hobbes's 'Leviathan' remained truly haunted by the 'Kingdom of the Fairies' who 'inhabite Darknesse, Solitudes and Graves',[5] because the latter's nominality echoes the nominality of Leviathan itself, and both 'engines of meaning' are equally arbitrary, although Hobbes's alone claims natural, subjective and even Biblical foundations.

Polybian Cycles versus Ecclesial Time

The abstraction of 'politics', the turning of it into a new sort of deductive science based on accident not substance and on 'artificial' and arbitrary causal [p. 22/23] connections, was the achievement of a voluntarist political theology. Here the 'secular' as an area of human autonomy is actually promoted by a theological anthropology for which human wilfulness, in certain circumstances, guarantees divine origin. This politics is a spatial abstraction out of 'matters of fact' whose 'register', according to Hobbes, is 'civil history', not 'Books of Philosophy' like *Leviathan*.[6] Yet from the Renaissance onwards, another root of a more 'scientific' politics was historicism, which tended to the conclusion that political practice must be adapted to customs, manners, religions and times.

It is false to see in the gradual emergence of a historicist perspective a wholly sudden break with traditional modes of thought. It was not, for example, necessarily incompatible with the allegorical mode of ecclesial time; a humanist like Erasmus could easily contain his sense of historical 'distance' within allegory, because the very tension

4 [note 42 in the original] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part III, ch. 35, p. 447; Part IV, ch. 44, pp. 629–30. J. G. A. Pocock, 'Time, history and eschatology in the thought of Thomas Hobbes', in *Politics, Language and Time* (London: Methuen, 1972).

5 [note 59 in the original] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part IV, ch. 47, p. 713.

6 [note 60 in the original] Ibid., Part I, ch. 9, pp. 147–8. Tito Magri, *De Cive* (Introduction) (Rome: Riuniti, 1981) pp. 12–13.

involved in typological figuration between the overarching unity of divine revelation and the difference between its successive phases can actually promote such an awareness.[7] Equally, the traditional perspectives of a 'civic' politics, inherited from Aristotle and the Romans, encouraged a reflection upon the given historical circumstances in which a civic, participatory virtue (rendered redundant by Hobbes) could best flourish.

If there is a break, then it is not rightfully located (as, for example, by J. G. A. Pocock) between a timeless, Christian, hierocratic politics and a 'purely human' temporal and activist politics.[8] This is to fail to see that doing and making remained 'sacralized' for Christian humanists from Salutati onwards, and to forget, also, that monastic institutions were regarded as humanly-instituted *politeiai*.[9] Rather, one must understand what Pocock calls 'the Machiavellian Moment' as the astonishing re-emergence of pagan political and philosophical time no longer as a makeshift, nor a Thomist preparation for grace, but rather as something with its own integrity, its own goals and values, which might even contradict those of Christianity. It is, as Grabmann recognized, a parallel phenomenon to 'Averroism', where philosophical truths may be in contradiction with the truths of the faith.[10]

Here then is another and completely different root of the secular. Yet the Machiavellian secular was not an area of pure neutrality with respect to faith. On the contrary, it only came to exist as the discovery of a new sort of *virtù* which could not be reconciled with the Christian virtues. If the Hobbesian [p. 23/24] field of power seems to be constructed by a perverse theology, then the Machiavellian field of power is constructed by a partial rejection of Christianity and appeal to an alternative *mythos*.

The humanist and historicist legacy was no less important for the emergence of modern social theory than the natural rights legacy of liberalism/absolutism. [. . .] [T]he eighteenth-century enlightenment was much preoccupied with an attempt to find a new version of antique virtue. Yet for all this, there is an important point of convergence between the two currents, which ensures that even the 'civic humanist' tradition is infected by individualism and instrumentalism. This point of convergence is the Roman stoic legacy, which directs attention to a pre-social human being which seeks sociation through an impulse belonging to its own *conatus*, or drive to self-preservation, and which also tends to redefine virtue as knowledge of, agreement with, action within or indifference to, historical *fate*.

In its Machiavellian version, civic humanism sheers off an Aristotelianism compatible with Christianity in favour of a notion of political *prudentia* as instrumental

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7 [note 61 in the original] Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse Mediévale*, II, II, pp. 317–28, 249–352.

8 [note 62 in the original] J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, pp. 31–80 (Princeton N.J.: Princeton UP, 1975).

9 [note 63 in the original] Salutati, *De Nobilitate*, ch. 31, pp. 218–220. J. H. Hexter, *The Vision of Politics on the Eve of the Reformation* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

10 [note 64 in the original] A. S. McGrade, *The Political Thought of William of Ockham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974) pp. 197–206.

manipulation.[11] At the same time, it subscribes to a *mythos* of fate which takes it outside Christian theological bounds. Whereas, for natural rights theory, conflict is endemic to fallen human nature and this original conflict must be suppressed by a hierocratic counter-violence imposing a fearful peace, for Machiavellianism there is a simultaneous 'heroic' promotion of both internal civic solidarity and external enmity, a mixture which is most gloriously human and yet also most fatefully doomed.[12]

The Machiavellian republic emerges not gradually, through the ironic disciplines of linear time, but suddenly and sporadically in a favourable moment, against the background of an unpredictable *fortuna*.[13] For medieval Christianity, the uncontrollable reverses of fortune represented the deep-seatedness of original sin within an overall providential design, but for Machiavelli *fortuna* is again an antique and impersonal compound of chaos and fatality. The aim of political *virtù* is to 'use' and surmount, for a time, this fortune. Machiavelli makes historicist, relativizing observations about the chances of different republics, observing that a relatively democratic republic like Venice should not make war, because the capture of foreigners will lead to the introduction of class divisions, whereas a class-divided republic like ancient Rome is well-equipped to make war and expand its population.[14] However, it is not really this relativism which makes Machiavelli a forebear of a modern and non-Christian politics. Rather, it is his explicit *preference* for the Roman option and his return to the etymological root of virtue as 'heroic manliness', to be cultivated supremely in war. This preference encompasses [p. 24/25] also the view that continued class conflict within the republic is functionally useful in preserving political 'liberty' – the habit of independence.[15] While Machiavelli by no means wishes to deny the validity of 'more moral' social virtues within their proper sphere, it is this option for internal conflict which ensures that a manipulative bias must be dominant among those who rule.

As the republic emerges 'suddenly', so its course is contained within a cyclical time. Machiavelli is heavily dependent upon the late-antique Greek-born writer Polybius, who, standing outside and at the end of Rome, interpreted its history as a progression from the rule of the few through the rule of the one to the rule of the many, culminating, through innumerable private conflicts, in an ultimate loss of aristocratic virtue.[16] Whereas the theological natural rights tradition discovered a 'self-sustaining' world of pure power without virtue, the non-Christian Machiavellian tradition derived from Polybius insisted that human power was a form of virtue, and hence just as historically

11 [note 65 in the original] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Henry C. Mansfield, jun., XXV (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985) pp. 98–9.

12 [note 66 in the original] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, trans. Leshe S. Watter (London: Penguin, 1970) pp. 15, 16, 118–26. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, pp. 49–80, 156–218.

13 [note 67 in the original] Ibid.

14 [note 68 in the original] Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, 5; 6 (1970) pp. 118–26.

15 [note 69 in the original] Ibid., 4; 4, pp. 113–15.

16 [note 70 in the original] Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, pp. 49–80.

precarious as the rarity of true virtue. The latter tradition ultimately lies behind the later dialectical and historicist theses of Hegel and Marx, but the eschatological 'resolutions' which these thinkers project depend, as we shall see, on the overlay of another theological programme, that of *theodicy*. For the pure Machiavellian tradition, by contrast, human meaning is 'present' and temporarily glorious – besides this there is only a lapsing back into the unmeaning fatality of history without the republic. The stance of this tradition towards Christianity is ambiguous. On the one hand it often supports a 'civil religion' – Christian or otherwise – which will 'functionally' promote civic solidarity. On the other hand, it attempts to revive, against Christianity, an antique sacrality, producing a new *mythos* of heroes without gods (though still, for Machiavelli, to be rewarded for the exercise of civic virtue by a single God) which is the second aspect of the modern 'secular'.[17]

Both the natural rights and the Machiavellian traditions in 'scientific politics' are heavily presupposed by all later social science. Yet from both a Christian *and* a metacritical perspective (meaning the historicist questioning of 'rational' foundations) it might seem that we have here only to do with heterodoxy on the one hand and the half-return of paganism on the other. For just as the first makes a perfect analysis only of its own artefact, so the second traces correctly the historical fate only of 'heroic man', which is precisely the ethical ontology which Christianity calls into question. In either case, it seems that, from the outset, the 'science of conflict' is not merely one branch of social science but rather that the 'scientific' approach seeks 'to know' power and conflict as ontologically fundamental. It follows that if Christianity seeks to 'find a place for' secular reason, it may be perversely compromising with what, on its own terms, is either deviancy or falsehood.

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17 [note 71 in the original] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XXVI, p. 103.

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